

Mapping Caribbean Histories: Glissant, Walcott, and the Counter-Poetics of Modernity

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ABSTRACT: That the history of modernity is characterised by a narrative blindness, wherein the historical and ontological significance of the Black subject is often unjustly overlooked in favour of a Western historiography, is a point that has and continues to concern the scholar of the Caribbean and Black diaspora. Yet while many attempts have been made to counter this fallacy, only tentative moves have been made toward a fundamental interrogation of not only this historiographic taxonomy, but also its broader relation to the poetics and politics of the Caribbean. Accordingly, the following paper seeks to make an intervention into the historiography and narrativity of modernity by considering this history from the position of the Black Caribbean subject, her phenomenology, and poetics. It is the central assertion herein, further, that if the history of modernity is defined by its neglect (its exclusion) of the Caribbean subject, it is important (as the work of Glissant and Walcott helps show) that in addressing this violent falsity we not only replace the proper subject of modernity into narratives of history, but that we also begin to think anew the very philosophical (conceptual) meaning of history itself. Furthermore, rather than seeing modernity (its histories and practices) as distinct from and antithetical to the histories of slavery and colonialism, this paper emphasises the need to reconstruct this relation on the basis of coextension and comutuality. The ambition here is not merely to create a false equation between slavery and modernity, as it is to highlight that critical continuity obtaining between these two sites. Moreover, this crucial continuity may only be well received if the art of the Caribbean artist – and naturally, that of the broader Black diasporic polity – is conceived of more as a space of counter-hermeneutic and historical revisionism.

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Introduction: The Caribbean Scholar and his/her History

The future of the West Indian militancy lies in art. All revolutions begin amateurishly, with forged or stolen weapons, but the West Indian artist knew the need for revolt without knowing what weapons to use, and just as a comfortable, self-hugging pathos hid in the most polemical of West Indian novels, so there was in the sullen ambition of the West Indian actor a fear that he lacked proper weapons, that his voice, colour, and the body were no match for the civilized concepts of [history].

– Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*

I begin with this rumination on Derek Walcott's words because they, in a sense, capture the very argument of this thesis, not only on the relationship between the "West Indian" people and modernity, but – and perhaps more crucially – also about that complicated relation between (Caribbean) poetics and history.¹ Walcott's point seeks more to address the role of

¹ The words "West Indian" and "Caribbean", as considered throughout this work, are used interchangeably. Where this isn't the case, I will be making explicit efforts to highlight this. However, I rely almost exclusively on the term Caribbean for my main discussion. Otherwise, where the reader sees the word "Caribbean", they may easily substitute "West Indian" – and vice versa. Although, I ultimately agree with Catherine Hall when she points out that: "West Indian is part of an older tradition of both colonial and anticolonial thought. Yet

theatre in Caribbean history and art; specifically the function of the Caribbean actor in the negotiation of a new Caribbean poetics. (He is involved with, if you like, Caribbean poetics as theatre and less in poetics as word.)² Still, I am interested in his claim that, for the “West Indian artist,” her art (i.e., her poem, novel, painting, etc.) also becomes a “weapon” with which she would counter those “civilized concepts” of history as promulgated by the West and its fallible taxonomies of modernity. What Walcott means, and what I wish to concentrate on next, is that if the history of modernity is defined by its neglect (its exclusion) of the Caribbean subject, it is important that in addressing this violent falsity we not only replace the proper subject of modernity into narratives of history, but that we also begin to think anew the very philosophical (conceptual) meaning of history. To Walcott, as to me, this may be realised in part through a fundamental *reimagination* of the relationship between history and poetics; that is, the relationship between “the civilized concept” and “art.” Rather than seeing modernity (its histories and practices) as distinct from and antithetical to the histories of slavery and colonialism, I wish to emphasise the need to reconstruct this relation as one that is coextensive and comutual. My ambition here is, not merely to create a false equation between slavery and modernity, as it is to highlight that critical continuity obtaining between these two sites. Moreover, this crucial continuity may only be well received if the art of the Caribbean artist – and naturally, that of the broader Black diasporic polity – is conceived of more as a space of counter-hermeneutic and historical revisionism.

This, still, is not an entirely new proposal (even as it is one that still requires sustained scholarly effort). In fact, it is the type of theoretical enquiry that informs the work of the Dominican scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant who, for instance, in his impressive study of Caribbean writing *Caribbean Poetics: Towards an Aesthetics of West Indian Literature* (1997), importantly reminds us that,

Literary theory, in order to account successfully for the ‘principles’ of Caribbean literature, must be tailored to fit the sociocultural context that gives rise to its systems of significance.

even if it is a category which has been superseded, it needs to be interrogated and understood, for it illuminates not only the formation of the historical realities of the Caribbean, but of the metropole too” (Hall 48).

² Bruce King has written extensively on this point in *Derek Walcott and West Indian Drama* (2003). For a more detailed analysis of the Caribbean actor’s role in Caribbean history, one can see this text. My main concern here is rather with Walcott’s perception of “art” as site of counter-poetics.

[And that] apart from drawing on the value system inherent in Caribbean culture, [...], Caribbean literary texts reflect the dynamic of a peculiar history. (*Caribbean Poetics* 5-6)

The above, an acknowledgment of the continuities between the “sociocultural context” and “aesthetic endeavour,” is also at the heart of Walcott’s realisation of the militant capacities of the “West Indian novel.” That is, if Torres-Saillant makes the crucial intervention against a monolithic account of aesthetic production and modernity – one which unjustly favours the Western episteme in its construction of this history – Walcott, in a similar manner, seeks to undermine this practice by way of instrumentalising his poetics with the inherent ability for the generative obstruction of these narratives of modernity.³ Both Walcott and Torres-Saillant, then, and like the Barbadian thinker George Lamming, appreciate that the quest for a “decolonised” literary practice is simultaneously one for a new hermeneutic language with which to make sense of the Caribbean, its histories, its humanity, and its phenomenologies (*Caribbean Poetics* 7). Specifically, if this new language is to be successfully realised, it would need not only to register the Black Caribbean subject within its accounts of modernity, but also understand the need to – as Glissant would have it – “reflect on a new relationship between history and literature. We need to *live it differently*” (*Caribbean Discourse* 77, [italics mine]). The search for a new literary theory, therefore, if it is one marked by its willingness to pay attention to the histories and politics of the Caribbean (its “sociocultural context”) in its formation, it is only so as it also aspires towards this reconceived “relationship between history and literature,” which is to say, towards this new *lived* relationship.

Glissant’s remarks here should recall those of Antonio Benítez-Rojo in *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (1997). There, the Cuban thinker tries to establish the reality of this new relationship between history and literature by acknowledging that what appears to be a case of historical and cultural *chaos* in the Caribbean, is actually an instance of what he calls “that flux of transformative plasma” (Benítez-Rojo 432) which, by noting the many distinct and disparate histories of the Caribbean, is also able to develop itself as an expression of an archipelagic aesthetic praxis. This praxis, furthermore, because it would register these recurring historical legacies of the Caribbean, finally allows for the existence of an

³ At the most basic level I am referring to a sort of modernist historiography which favours Europe and America in its treatments of the modern subject and its cultural sensibility. More pressing to my concerns, yet, is the ignored role of the Black subject in these narratives.

“island” that depends on these paradoxes and ambiguities for its expression. A ‘repeating island,’ so called because it would resist the trap of a monolithic Caribbean for one that is as historically complex as it is aesthetically unpredictable. To Benítez-Rojo, more pragmatically: “This archipelago, like others, can be seen as an island that ‘repeats’ itself. [... , ...] where all repetition brings necessarily a difference and a deferral” (Benítez-Rojo 431-2).⁴ That is, if this novel Caribbean aesthetic practice is to produce a different hermeneutic language, it would need to be able to accommodate these imperatives of (historical and cultural) difference and deferral. In other words, like Torres-Saillant and Walcott, Benítez-Rojo wants to speak of a different Caribbean literary practice that, in reconceptualising the ambiguities of the Caribbean islands, both challenges Western narratives of modernity while also allowing the Caribbean to build its own hermeneutic language with which it would account for these very ambiguities.

Of course, Torres-Saillant and Benítez-Rojo are not the only ones to have made these suggestions (I isolate their views here merely in an attempt to situate my own argument.) Others too, like Sylvia Wynter and, more recently, Victoria Collis-Buthelezi, have made similar observations about the Caribbean’s cultural uniqueness and the attendant need to develop what the latter, in her reading of Eric Walrond’s anthology, would aptly call a literary and political “Caribbean regionalism” (Collis-Buthelezi 41).⁵ In outlining her position, Collis-Buthelezi further makes a distinction between a “black internationalism” and this Caribbean regionalism. Still, as I am less interested in the exact pattern of Collis-Buthelezi’s arguments here, I wish to only evoke this distinction as it is also it which informs my own contentions herein for what I will later call an intra-Caribbean (or intra-regionalist) aesthetic taxonomy as represented, in my particular case, by the work of both Walcott and Édouard Glissant. Indeed, Collis-Buthelezi’s discussion may be important for at least one other reason. Like Wynter, and as David Scott reads the latter in “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter” (2000), since “the Caribbean has its own ontology,” it not only has “its own reading practices” (Collis-Buthelezi 42), but also – through this reimagining of a Caribbean

⁴ It is obvious that, like the deconstructionist thinker Jacques Derrida (see *Speech and Phenomena* (1973)), Benítez-Rojo deploys these terms of “difference and deferral” to denote that heterogeneity and indeterminacy to meaning, which also denies any finality to interpretation. This, too, is my understanding of the idea of a “repeating island”.

⁵ Although Victoria Collis-Buthelezi is more interested, because she also considers the Cape in her reading of Walrond, in what she more specifically calls “oceanic Caribbean regionalisms” between the Caribbean and (South) Africa, I find her distinctions between this type regionalism and a “black internationalism” very instructive for my own discussions on the possibilities of an intra-Caribbean aesthetic taxonomy. It is, then, in this somewhat different way that I also deploy the critical value of a Caribbean regionalism.

regional ontology – has its own way of practicing what it means to be human. I am here not suggesting that Collis-Buthelezi is merely interested in a restating of the Jamaican’s version of an “anticolonial humanism,” rather – as is my conviction throughout – this is to say that in shifting her discussion from a black internationalism towards a Caribbean regionalism, Collis-Buthelezi appears to echo Wynter’s claims (calls *really*) for a new humanism. Scott’s description of Wynter’s vision is worth citing at length here:

For Wynter, the hope of a revisioned humanism depends not merely on the perspectivalism of the deconstructive gesture (the critique of the false of partial humanism that have so far ordered emancipationist projects). It depends also, dialectically, on a reconstructed understanding of the grounds of human being, a reconstruction that entails a deeper grasp of the dimensions of human cognition and human action. In this, of course she runs against the grain of much in contemporary cultural-critical work. Wynter seeks to restore to our conceptualization of human life the framework of a direction, a *telos*. But she wants to do this while evading a vulgar metaphysical essentialism – which is why the register of discourse has the significance it has for her. For while she is concerned to anchor the human and its projects in its material (social and bodily) conditions, her concern is to track the ‘codes’ and ‘genres’ in terms of which the understanding (including self-understanding) is constituted. (Scott 121)

My pairing of Collis-Buthelezi with Wynter, therefore, is primarily informed by two assumptions. The first of these is based on the recognition that any ambitions towards an autonomous Caribbean literary and ontological tradition – whether through a decolonised humanism or by way of an “oceanic Caribbean regionalism” – necessarily evoke the question of the Caribbean subject’s position in the history of modernity. Secondly, because it is never enough to merely reveal the epistemic partiality of the Western code, both Collis-Buthelezi and Wynter – as (I will be showing in the ensuing two chapters) is the case with Walcott and Glissant – understand that the main responsibility for the Caribbean critic is also with the institution (the retrieval proper) of a new hermeneutic language, what Scott sees as Wynter’s appreciation of that irreplaceable duty “to track the ‘codes’ and ‘genres’ in terms of which the understanding [of the Caribbean] (including self-understanding) is constituted.”

In other words, if we are concerned with the annulment of a Western “epistemic violence” (Spivak 24), we are only so as a way of also developing these new codes and genres with which to understand the Caribbean subject’s ontology and its relationship to the history of

modernity. And, as I contend is the case with Walcott and Glissant, this discovery of different registers for the Caribbean subject should always be attended by an investigation of the very conceptuality of history – that fundamental interrogation of the logic around which the practices of historiography form themselves. Additionally, it also concerns itself with the *re-expression* of the relation between these now revised codes and genres of historiography and the poetics of the Caribbean; showing this relation to be one of *coextensiveness* rather than separation. The advantage of this move – towards a Caribbean aesthetic taxonomy that privileges coextension in its understanding of the relationship between poetics and history – I argue, finally, is that it imbues Caribbean art with a political materiality that allows it to serve as site of both historical and ontological reinterpretation. To Walcott and Glissant, I crucially argue, if the strength of the Caribbean artist’s work rests in its capacity to undo the Western framework of modernity, it also – because this historiographical work presupposes the ontological – manages to help delineate a new understanding of the Black Caribbean subject as a major player in the formation of a modern sensibility and subjectivity.

Hypothesis and Premises

My basic hypothesis in this paper is that the literary work of Derek Walcott (1930 – 2017) and Édouard Glissant (1928 – 2011) instantiate that particularly troubled legacy the Caribbean person shares with modernity. In particular, their work – both separately and as a unit – not only offer alternative approaches to the history of modernity, but also does this by way of modifying our understandings of Caribbean poetics. Theirs, I argue here, is – as Glissant would have it – “*the quarrel with history*,”⁶ where this quarrel also represents an opportunity for a poetic *re-presentation* of modern history as a phenomenon continuous with the experiences of the Black Caribbean people. Similarly, their achievements are such that through a careful reading of their poetry and essays – as will be my exercise here – the relationship between

⁶ Glissant here (*Caribbean Discourse*) gets this title, “The Quarrel with History”, from Edward Baugh’s paper “The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History” (first presented at a conference in Jamaica in 1976). However, as I momentarily consider the debate, it is from Glissant’s understanding of it. Later on, in chapter 1 in particular, I open up my discussion more to also consider Baugh’s comments on the same question.

Caribbean poetics and modernity becomes one of coextension rather than separation. What I mean by this is that a reading of Walcott's and Glissant's work helps show that the distinction between poetics and history (or even historiography) – otherwise assumed to be valid and inescapable – is in fact not only erroneous; but, if reimagined, may also allow for the Black Caribbean subject's involvement in modernity to be more clearly comprehended, and then codified anew through a different hermeneutic register.

My two chapters, accordingly, are designed in such a way that both seek to respond to this problem. The problem spelt out, as Simon Gikandi suggests in *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011), is this: since “slavery and the culture of taste were connected by the theories and practices that emerged in the modern period” (*Culture of Taste* xiii), it is surprising that writers like Goerg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and James Anthony Froude – buffeted by the erstwhile acts of colonialist Christopher Columbus – would choose instead to ignore this in their treatments of the question of modernity. It is this fallacy (indeed, its refutation) which seeks to remove the Black Caribbean subject from the language of modernity, which also forms the themes of my discussion in chapter 1. After exposing the limitations of what I will be calling the Columbian-Hegelian-Froudean schema of modernity – that spurious taxonomy of modern history which erects itself exactly at the exclusion of the Black slave subject – I then continue to consider the responses to this problem by later scholars of the Black diaspora. Yet, if I do this, it is less as an end in itself; rather, I wish here to trace the development of this hermeneutic language – a Black counterpoetics – that comes to inform the work of Walcott and Glissant. In lieu of being merely interested in this dialogue between the Western racists and scholars of Black thought, Chapter 1 seeks further to extend this conversation as to help show that the responses advanced by these later scholars all aspire towards a reconceptualisation of the concept of history itself.

More specifically, my aim in Chapter 1 is to show that this body of scholarship – specifically by Cyril L. R. James, John J. Thomas, Anthony Bogues and Gikandi, et al. – works both on the level of politics and poetics (a counter-hermeneutics and its capacity for a representational logic) as it does on that of the philosophical significance of history.⁷ This, indeed, is my thesis here: that if these responses function against this Columbian-Hegelian-Froudean schema of modernity, they also – on an even more rudimentary level – serve as those sites whereby the

⁷ I have in mind specifically the following texts: *Froudacity* (1889), *The Black Jacobins* (1938), *Black Heretics*, *Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectual* (2003), and *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011).

very idea(ation) of history is itself recast. I argue for this as this is also the type of critical advantage missed by these former attempts. While James, Thomas, Bogues, and Gikandi et al., all succeed in the identification of this theoretical blindness by the Western episteme, their awareness of the resultant opportunity to also fundamentally (on the level of logic and its first principles) reinterpret history are at best tentative and only secondary to their endeavours. I do not, of course, mean to say that there is nothing to be derived from their reputable attempts. Contrary to this, I wish rather to show that even more can come from their respective discussions if this opportunity (for a rehistoricity) is registered and then – as I will be doing in chapter 1 – given central attention. Therefore, if this chapter is to succeed here, it should be so as it would have also been able to continue this tradition of Black cultural and literary thought, by way of considering the possible consequences of an alternative modernity when conceptualised from a position of the Black Caribbean subject.

In chapter 2 I move toward a more detailed and focused consideration of this possibility toward a rehistoricisation of the Caribbean. As in the previous chapter, where I would have concerned myself with the replacement of the Black Caribbean subject within modernity, in chapter 2 I aim to make a more practical shift through an appreciation of Walcott's and Glissant's work, as each of their work relate to this question about the relationship between the Caribbean and modernity. Here, I particularly will be reading the Caribbean against a tradition of thought which prefers to see this region as an expression of a cultural and historical "nothingness." If such readings are made by Columbus, Hegel, and Froude – by a colonialist-racist tradition – I argue, they have also been expressed by some Caribbean writers, like V.S. Naipaul who, in his novel *The Middle Passage* (1962), would want to convince us that: "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (Naipaul 29). Less interested in the exact implications of this mis-reading by Naipaul, I instead will be focusing on the critical usefulness of the responses offered by Walcott and Glissant to it. My central thesis here is that, both Walcott and Glissant respond to this Naipaulean critique of the Caribbean as zone of historical "nothingness" by favourably constructing their respective poetics around this very historical gap. Rather than seeing the Caribbean in the colonial-racist manner of Columbus, Hegel, and Froude, or in the nihilist sense of Naipaul, Walcott and Glissant – albeit each from different positions – emphasise, as will be my main argument, the importance of fundamentally reinterpreting the very relation between history and poetics in the imagination of the Caribbean and its counter-cultural practices.

Their work, furthermore, attempts to show a critical coextensiveness between a Caribbean poetics and modern history; and in so doing, argues not only for a historical continuity between the Black Caribbean subject (her histories of slavery and colonialism) and modernity, but also for a repurposing of this Caribbean poetics as valid sites of rehistoricity. To help show this, I have chosen to here focus on a few deliberately selected texts. In Walcott's case, I will be particularly drawing my inspiration from his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970), his collection of essays *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (1998), and his poem "The Schooner Flight" (found in *Derek Walcott: Selected Poems* (2007)). Naturally, I do not limit myself to these texts, but only highlight them as it is my conviction that they best seem to articulate Walcott's trope of *amnesia*, with which, I argue, he develops his counterpoetics. Similarly, where I pay especial attention to Glissant's two studies of Caribbean history and literature, *The Poetics of Relation* (2006) and *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (1989), and his poetry anthology *The Collected Poems of Édouard Glissant* (specifically his poem "The Indies") (2005), it is also for the same instrumental reasons. In particular I will argue that whereas Walcott uses his trope of amnesia to counter these accusations of a Caribbean "nothingness," Glissant depends on his idea of *opacity* to make similar objections. Both, ultimately – and this is my main argument in chapter 2 – invent these tropes not only to refute the claims of a Western episteme, but also to construct a new hermeneutic code with which to construct both a (intra)-Caribbean literary language as well as a new semantic for the history of modernity.

To accomplish this, I hope to finally show, Walcott creates his poetics – through (but not limited to) his trope of amnesia (with its proclivity for mimicry and performance) – as marked both by its capacity for the undoing of a Western historiography of modernity as by an aspiration toward a redefinition of the relation between poetics and history (modernity). Moreover, Walcott finally responds to the accusations of a Caribbean nothingness by first identifying its conceptual potentialities for a rehistoricity, and then by attempting to actualise it in his own poetics. This is so because, to Walcott, this nothingness is nothing more than amnesia turned creativity, turned – finally, through the processes of literary and cultural imagination – everything. In other words, I will be arguing that Walcott refuses to endorse the Naipaulean framework by precisely *re*-diagnosing this nothingness as not an end itself, but rather as a philosophical beginning for the reconceptualisation of the Caribbean as well as its poetics' relation to modern history. My reading of Glissant will share the same ambitions. As regards the latter, I argue that Glissant evokes his trope of opacity in order to be able to disturb

what he considers the oppressive monolingual politics of the West and its capacity for the complete erasure of the Caribbean subject and her history. I want to show here that, according to the Martinican, in order to free the Caribbean subject from a Western historiographical category, her opacity – her “right not to be understood” (Britton 19) – would need to be both respected and centralised in the creation of her representative poetics. In other words, my arguments here (primarily through my reading of “The Indies”) will show that not only are the histories of the slave trade and colonisation important to an understanding of modernity, but that this would also need to be accompanied by a simultaneous recognition of the Black slave’s opacity.

A Note on the Conclusion

Finally, because amnesia and opacity – both the results of overlapping historical and political phenomena – are best captured by the poetics of this region, these poetics themselves also become sites of historical recording, of a Caribbean rehistoricity proper. This is how I will conclude my thesis; by showing that both Walcott and Glissant make it possible for us to start imagining what I will be calling, in the conclusion, an “intra-Caribbean” aesthetic praxis.⁸ Because, as Glissant usefully tells us of Walcott, “The quarrel with History is perhaps for Derek Walcott the affirmation of the urgency of a revaluation of the conventions of analytic thought” (*Caribbean Discourse* 65), I further argue that this “revaluation of the conventions of analytic thought” can only occur if the Caribbean is seen as a region with its own aesthetic codes and systems. My conclusion, therefore, if it would function as a final remark on my thesis, should also be taken as a space wherein originates new concerns for the Caribbean scholar. I make this move for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it is the conviction of the current work that it would be very presumptuous of any scholar to claim to have offered an exhaustive account of the complex relationship between the Caribbean and modernity. And on the other, as the history of the Caribbean automatically presupposes the histories of other spaces (like Africa

⁸ In a way, I want to insist that the conclusion to this work be also seen as an epilogue; wherein the “repetitive” nature (the futures of Black diaspora, as it were) of this type of scholarly enquiry may be registered and ultimately given new taxonomic expression.

and Europe), it is only natural that any treatments of this region also consider the value of the Black diaspora to a Caribbean poetics. I will be concluding my thesis thus (with a brief “note on the futures of the Black diaspora”) because the Caribbean should be understood as a site in constant flux (in constant becoming), where – as Benítez-Rojo has informed us – the histories of these islands are always “repeating” themselves toward a futurist articulation of the Caribbean (and its poetics) in relation to a greater Black diaspora.

Chapter One:

Fourth Boy: We going to make hist'ry. I always want to make some hist'ry.

Second Boy: Me too, I read 'bout all those who been making history, William the Conqueror an' Richard an' all these. I read how they make hist'ry, an' I say to myself 'tis time I make some too.

First Boy: We going to make hist'ry by Foster Fence. Let's make hist'ry.

– *In the Castle of My Skin*, George Lamming.⁹

At one point in his classic novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Lamming – fittingly using the boyish voices of his characters – makes a politically insightful and, more to my own objectives, philosophically and literary perspicacious commentary on history and its nature. In the exchange cited above, at a pivotal moment when the four boys – the semi-autobiographical protagonist, G., and his schoolmates (all equally armed with a combativeness borne of a severe dissatisfaction with an alienating historical account of the Caribbean and its people promulgated by their school) – make a commitment to seek revenge against the wayward pedagogical tendencies of the headmaster, something more than just youthful energy is at play here. It is history, or better yet, its very (mis)-representation by the metonymically colonial headmaster, that first invites – and ultimately wants to sustain – the boys' desires to make their own "hist'ry". Still, the quarrel, as it were, is not merely with history – but, more fundamentally – with the conceptualisation of history itself; that is, if the charge is on the epistemological level

⁹ *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) and *The Emigrants* (1954), are both novels concerned with the historical legacies of exile and colonialism in the Caribbean in ways that are consistent with my present arguments herein. It is, accordingly, for these reasons that I begin my discussion with the above passage. In Celeste, A. Wheat's analysis, the former especially "is not merely a novel that chronicles the experiences of a child coming of age in the Caribbean, but may also be viewed as a novel capturing an important historical moment in a society that in many ways is also coming of age." See "Examining Colonialism and Exile in George Lamming's *In The Castle of My Skin* (1953), *The Emigrants* (1954), and *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960)".

(with what constitutes history?) it is also, more searchingly, an ontological one – concerned with the very ideation of history itself.

Edward Baugh, making a similar reading of Lamming's striplings, puts the matter thus: "What the boys are searching for, however unconsciously, is not just a history, but *a concept* of history that will help them to make sense of the world, of their lives, that will bring all aspects of their experience into harmonious relationships" ("The West Indian Writer" 68, [italics mine]). Lamming, in other words, wants his boys to ask the question that seeks to interrogate the relationship between history and their Caribbean livelihoods: what, one imagines Lamming's G. posing the relevant enquiry, is history to me, to the Black Caribbean subject? Which is also to ask, if one were to think of it less narrowly, a related question about the nature of history: simply, what is history? Or, where one may prefer the First Boy's direct vocalisation of the same query: "What make it [history] so big as all that?"

That Lamming would be interested in the question of history for the Caribbean person is, obviously, neither a surprise nor that exciting a fact in and of itself. Like most Caribbean writers writing around this time (the 1950s), the legacies of slavery and colonialism – and just within a decade prior to the publication of his 1953 novel, the aftermath of the two World Wars – would make him keenly aware of the need to reimagine, with that "acute social consciousness" (Paquet 18) that so characterises his oeuvre, a set of new critical taxonomies and vocabularies with which to both conceptualise history itself, whilst attempting to historicise the Caribbean space and its cultural and political consciousness afresh. I mean by this of course, not exactly that Caribbean writing is reducible to the historical; far from this misjudgement, I rather want to suggest that history – as both (*non*)-event and archive (for reasons to be made clearer in due course) – is so central to the Caribbean's imagination that any attempts, be they poetic, essayistic, novelistic, or otherwise, to record this space and its political legacies always prove themselves to be inescapably historical. Glissant's point is instructionally useful here: "the meeting points between Caribbean literatures (Anglophone, francophone, hispanophone, Creole) do not result from a decision on the part of those who produce this writing: they are still hidden traces of the same historical movement, of an adherence to the culture" (*Caribbean Discourse* 61).

It is, in other words, one thing to equate history with Caribbean culture – and thereby risk the unproductive error of erecting a fallacious symbiosis between writing and history – and another, as is Glissant's suggestion and mine very own contention herein too, to suggest that

the Caribbean writer almost always enters his poetics through an ineluctably embattled negotiation with history and the theoretical implications this has on both the construction of his subjecthood, as of that of his land. What may initially appear a case of uncritical obsession with history, then, should more accurately come eventually to show itself as a useful method of cartographing the Caribbean experience – “the quarrel with history” is, in fact, also a debate with its historiography (the study of the writing of history and written histories) as it is with the philosophical ramifications thereof.

Accordingly, the concern of the present chapter is roughly twofold – not so much out of any hierarchical construct of critical importance – as from a philosophical obligation to retain a sense of discursive coherence deemed crucial and possible only if, as is the thematic focus of the first part, the historical context of the Caribbean is proffered sufficient attention in any creative and critical engagements which aspire to treat its ambiguities and mis-representations. It is my objective, then, to raise a few philosophical and historical questions about Caribbean history and its people, while advancing a series of responses which – if they do not pretend to be exhaustive and comprehensive – should, nonetheless, be conducive to the type of scholarly and discursive ambitions envisioned by this chapter (as by the entire paper). I encourage the reader, therefore, to both recognise this as me saying that the Caribbean is, while a place of febrile literary and cultural activity, also one of a potentially generative historical slipperiness – the latter of which, because it necessarily also informs the nature of these cultural productions, must not be taken lightly in any scholarly debates on the Caribbean. In other words, any scholarship which seeks to consider writing in the Caribbean, as is herein intended, must of necessity also *bother* itself with the history of this space. Any other way, similarly, merely risks – because of this original blindness from which it would have emerged – further obscuring the literary and cultural specificity of the area, while possibly restaging the problems with which this writing principally concerns itself.

Consequently, the ensuing section sub-titled “The Caribbean with/in Modernity” – is an attempt to locate the Caribbean *with* and *in* the discourse(s) of modern history, primarily with the intention of, not only tracing the evolutionary pattern of this history and taxonomies, but of also showing that its documentation is not a blameless exercise, nor an apolitical one, as may initially seem the case. More specifically, as I argue throughout this chapter, that the historical accounts of modernity, like those of Columbus, Hegel, and Froude (what I throughout call a Columbian-Hegelian-Froudean schema of modernity), which seek to remove the Black subject

from their considerations err not only on the level of historical accuracy (at best, only an epistemological delinquency) but also on that of – through my engagements with the work of Cyril L. R. James, John J. Thomas and Simon Gikandi, et al. – ethical and metaphysical one. What I essentially mean by this, not exactly a suggestion that one crime is greater than the other, rather that considered as a metaphysical and ethical problem (which it surely is), this misrepresentation of the Black Caribbean subject in modernist records also functions as an attempt to perpetuate this subject's non-identity. And that, it is then in pausing to consider this – as is the aim of the present chapter – that we begin to see the very related crimes of slavery and colonialism as not merely political blunders of a misguided colonialist-generation, but more truthfully, as a set of strategic practices – informed by both a stubborn and ultimately untenable imperialist sensibility – which, if it has ceased to be explicit, is nonetheless existent and continues to survive into present day, albeit mostly (or not) in subtler ways.

That is to say, if I offer my central thesis as an investigation into the historiographic language around “the contemporary question of Caribbean studies” (Scott 1) and its poetics, I also show – through a reading of the critical work by scholars of the Caribbean and the Black diaspora – that part of the problem rests not merely in the kinds of questions asked, but (equally, if not more) in the logical foundations of this inquisitive language. In order, furthermore – and as will finally be the point of my second chapter – to counter this taxonomic bluntness, we would both need to first identify the historical continuities between Black Caribbean poetics and modern history, and then appreciate the new vocabulary constructed by this realisation. The second chapter is, correspondingly, always to be placed in direct discursive and analytical relation with the first, as therein lies the crux of my chief argument for a (intra)-Caribbean literary (and cultural) history that is as historiographically fresh as it is informed by a new language, one which recognises the productive affinities between modern history and Black Caribbean poetics, as it does this poetics' capacity for a rehistoricisity – a remaking of history, as of that of the conceptual chronicling of history.

It will be very imperative to commence with a survey of the historical narratives that have – over the centuries – accumulated to define and discredit the Caribbean as a site of human activity. For it is also only in this way that one may fully come to appreciate the significant interventions made by Glissant, Walcott, et al.: theirs, it must be recognised, is a literary practice that necessarily writes through and against a set of historical and political lacunae. Perhaps most famous of these, and certainly most dangerous, is the now untenable story of Christopher Columbus (1450-1506) as the “discoverer” of the New World.¹⁰ Columbus, according to this account – and what eventually shows itself to be nothing more than the ambitious projection of a white-Western fantasy onto lands unknown to it – becomes, in the year 1492, the first European-coloniser to establish contact with the Americas. Favoured by this *plot* – in both senses of the term, as refers to the act of *creating a story* and that of *conspiring* – is the simple fallacy that what would come to be known as “the New World” only gains historical (and even ontological) legitimacy the instant it is placed in dialectical relation with Europe. Additionally, not only is this dialectic invented, but it is also legitimised through the acts of slavery and colonialism. In other words, prior to the arrival of Columbus, the New World either does not exist or it does, but only so as a depraved site of non-history. Therefore, it becomes the urgent responsibility of the coloniser to inscribe some form of historical status onto this space, as does Columbus when he names the Bahamas archipelago “San Salvador.”¹¹ The act of plotting – made of a sinister combination of colonial inscription and antebellum cartography – is of course revealing of the co-extensive relation, as I hold, that exists between history and language in the making and unmaking of the Caribbean (yet more on this later, though). At the moment, I want preliminarily to trace the evolution of this Columbian myth as it informs the writings of other European thinkers in subsequent years, and finally, necessitates in the work of Glissant, Walcott et al., responses that seek to interrogate and ultimately disclose the brutal artificiality of this account.

Goerg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) offers us perhaps the most classical example of how European thought sees – in Lewis Gordon’s sense of a double racist view that recognises

¹⁰ In fact, later research has shown that not only was Columbus not the “bringer” of history to the Caribbean, but that he was, amongst Europeans themselves, also not the first to establish contact with the Americas. There is evidence that the Icelandic explorer, Leif Erikson, was first to do so five hundred years before the Spaniard. Still, the issue – as my paper argues – is less with who did or didn’t “discover” the Caribbean, than it is with the complete disregard of other histories around this region in pursuit of a Eurocentric narrative. This is my challenge, and not the verity of either the Columbian historian or Eriksonian one.

¹¹ For the exact history of the origins of this name, *San Salvador*, see William D. Phillips Jr., “Columbus Christopher,” in David Buisseret (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to World Exploration* (2012).

the Black body only through an associated negation of this subject's very humanity (*Bad faith and Anti-Black Racism* 101) – the African person, and by extension, the Caribbean enslaved individual. While the Columbian myth concerns itself primarily with the colonial relationship between the West and the New World or, more specifically, with the Spanish West and the Guanahani island of the Bahamas (with colonial conquest proper), Hegel's writing (or his "philosophy of history," as it were), speaks both of the New World – and via this very rumination – of Africa's "childish" condition. That is to say, whereas the former is the expression of a colonial imperative, the latter – by way of appropriating this same colonial register – makes a set of related claims about the philosophical illegitimacy of Africa as a site of historical significance.¹² Here is how Hegel summarises his views on Africa's backwardness and lack of historical weight:

Africa proper ... is the gold-land compressed within itself – the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night. Its isolated character originates, not merely in its tropical nature, but essentially in its geographical conditions. (*Lectures* 84)

And again, only now with more finality and an even greater rhapsodic flair:

This mode of being of the Africans explains why it is extraordinarily easy to turn them into fanatics. The realm of the Absolute Spirit is so impoverished among them and the natural Spirit so intense that any representation which they are inculcated with suffices to impel them to respect nothing, to destroy everything ... Africa ... does not have history as such. Consequently we abandon Africa, to never mention it again. *It is not part of the historical world; it does not evidence historical movement or development ...* What we understand properly as Africa is something isolated and without history, still mired in the natural Spirit, and therefore can only be located here at the entrance gate of Universal History. (*Lectures* 231-34, [italics mine].)

¹² It is, of course, not unreasonable to make this connection between Hegel and Columbus – both concern themselves with, fundamentally, the (mis)-representation of Blackness (broadly understood to encompass all that which is not European) subject and his historical position. This is what motivates my connection of them herein.

According to Hegel, who should be rightly appreciated as the definitive expression of the common European thinking of his time, the African subject is permanently a political infant on the margins of “Universal History.” A further admonition is made, since the African continent has no independent history, it is thus the unpassable assignment of the Western colonialist (Columbus et al.) to elevate this history into existence.¹³ In other words, (western) modernity – a direct product of slavery and colonialism, as might also be noted – here marks that peculiar practice by which the Black subject is inscribed into ontological *signification* by an alien socio-historical lexicon designed by the European colonialist and finally articulated by his dubious poetics of Universal history. Of greater interest, yet, is not only the horrendous short-sightedness of such racist observations of the Hegelian thought framework, but how these – if one were to be unequivocal about things – appear to want to criminally essentialise the narrative of modernity by rendering it an “un-African” fact; or more candidly, by seeking to make it the result of White colonisers and their cultural endeavour and adventurism.¹⁴

To Hegel, Africa is, not like Europe, the space of the unmodern, the space of the dangerously infantile– perennially located without proper historical discourse. Europe, as he puts it more unashamedly in his famous lectures, is the beginning and end (“the Centre and the end”) of history, and because the continent is also situated at an apparent socio-historical posteriority (only “at the entrance gate of Universal History”), it is of no use to Europe and its broader “civilised” community – in reality: “... modern Christian Europe has nothing to learn from other worlds, other cultures. It has its principle in itself and is, at the same time, the full realisation of that principle” (72).¹⁵ A sort of self-fulfilling prophecy Europe is to Hegel. Europe, that is, is considered to be automatically grander than all other cultural and historical spaces – both African, and because of slavery, Caribbean too – and *must*, therefore, always feature in the very enterprise of the modernisation of the African subject, which is principally

¹³ Columbus’ exploits were to be mimicked by other Spanish conquistadors, among them Hernan Cortez (1485–1547), Vasco Nunez (1475–1519), and Las Casa (c. 1484–1566), to name just a few. Western modernity, further, is replete with examples of this patriarchal and imperial expansionist practice.

¹⁴ See, for example, Simon Gikandi’s *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011) for discussions of Africa’s role in the construction of this European modernist sensibility. Or “Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference”. *Modernism/modernity* 10.3 (2003): 455–480.

¹⁵ This, as retrospection proves, is obviously not true; Africa has and continues to offer quite a bit – whether materially, culturally, or spiritually – to modern Global sociality. Again, see Gikandi (2005 & 2011). One may even consider Hip-Hop (Rose, Tricia: *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994)), Jazz (O’Meally, Robert G., Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin: *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (2004)), and even the history of the Converse shoe as examples of this continued Africanist influence.

to say, the Europeanisation of Africa and the African person. Embalmed thus, modernity reveals itself to be that exclusively European (and masculinist) experience whereby history is understood by a movement from a primordial non-Western-ness (Africa and the Caribbean) into the “cultured” and “cultivated” centre, a centre that is also the West (mainly Europe and America).

There are, of course, many ways of responding to this dubious position, some more useful than others in their critical contributions. For instance, the Argentine-Mexican philosopher, Enrique Dussel, would want to suggest that one always approach Hegel’s writings on Africa with a degree of *informed* absurdity that recognises the limitations of the former’s philosophies, and thereafter work towards their critique:

Hegel has a number of pages that deserve to be read, although one needs to approach the task with a sense of humor, since they are they are a kind of fantastical apotheosis of racist ideology, full of superficial prejudices and received opinions and a seemingly infinite sense of superiority that illustrate well the European state of mind at the beginning of the nineteenth century. (Dussel 70)

This argument, shall we call it the *zeitgeist fallacy*, would no doubt be the type of defence favoured most by many Hegelian apologists who, in factoring in context and sensibility (“it was the nineteenth-century” excuse), also seek to exonerate Hegel and the West from any charges of human denigration of the Black subject and her history. It certainly is not Dussel’s aim, however, to excuse Hegel from any responsibility – “[I] do not negate reason, ... , but the irrationality of violence generated by the myth of modernity. Against postmodernist irrationalism, [I] affirm the ‘reason of the Other’” (75).¹⁶ Still, appreciated differently – that is, with a sense of all the possible meanings that could emerge from them (as indirect caution!) – his words also more usefully offer access into the very psyche of the coloniser and his preferred relationships with both African and Caribbean history.¹⁷ What I’m suggesting here is that the

¹⁶ Dussel wants to speak of a transcendence of modernity that binds both victim and conqueror in an ineluctable relationship of co-realisation. A trans-modernity that recognises the co-mutuality between slave and colonizer (Dussel 76). It would be worthy to compare this position with Glissant’s theory of a “poetics of relation”.

¹⁷ Dussel plays on irony to construct his argument, and so when he speaks of humour, he is actually inviting us to think more acutely of Hegel – if not exactly on his racist stance on Africa, than certainly on what is revealed in the acceptance of the ridiculousness of these pronouncements. I would argue it is important to always note this when engaging with his writing.

specialness of Dussel's remarks rest, not merely in the fact that he wants to annul this "myth of modernity" by illustrating of the "*incorporative* solidarity" that necessarily exists "between center/periphery, man/woman, different races, different ethnic group, different classes, civilisation/nature, Western culture/Third World culture, et. cetera." (76), but in the more nuanced point expressed in this annulment; namely, that the coloniser remains incapable of imagining both himself and the "other" outside of these ideological polarities. And that, because of this, in conceptions of history, he can only too easily succumb to the trap of perpetuating this binarist logic in a way that further obscures the Black person's ontological status. Dussel's achievement, yet, is no easy, straightforward collapsing of binaries of the postmodernist sort envisioned by the likes of Lyotard, Jameson et al., rather, his is with the more fundamental recognition of the imperative to reconceptualise the very philosophical groundings presupposed in our deliberations of history as concept.¹⁸ Whether this happens outside binaries or not is almost ancillary to Dussel's thinking, the main motivation – a motivation tragically missed by both Columbus and Hegel – is the need to enter historical discourse at a new level that is also accompanied by a simultaneous imagination of different methodological and disciplinary approaches to the Caribbean question.

This, then, becomes the foundational premise – at least if one accepts Dussel's thinking – for a sort of counter-modernity that, in speaking from a historical periphery and intellectual marginality, also heralds a novel philosophical approach to history and its study. The New World here emerges less as a site of historical emptiness and intellectual (cultural) poverty, as both Columbus and Hegel would want to misrepresent, but – because of a recognition of the undeniable co-mutuality attending both modernity and the politics of its historicisation – more as both a property of the West as it is of Africa and the Caribbean. In other words, Dussel rejects this inorganic synthesis of a Columbian fabulation with a Hegelian rhetoric, which seeks to obscure the ontological and historical value of the New World; and rather, replaces this with a full admittance of a philosophical reconstitution of modernist history and historiography as read from the New World perspective. Alas, the same cannot be said of the English historian, James Anthony Froude (1818-1894) who, in his book (*The English in the West Indies: Or, The Bow of Ulysses* (1887)) based on his travels in the Caribbean, offers arguably one of the most

¹⁸ I am thinking, for instance, of the following texts: Lyotard, Jean-François. "The Postmodern Condition." *Modernity: Critical Concepts* 4 (1999) and Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). My goal, yet, is not to dismiss them in their entirety, but to distinguish Dussel's intervention from their discussions. While Jameson and Lyotard oppose conceptuality at its core, Dussel wants rather a reformulation of it.

racist accounts of the Caribbean and its Black populations since his predecessors, Columbus and Hegel, albeit from a decidedly English position.¹⁹ Like Columbus and Hegel before him, Froude is a colonial-racist extraordinaire who believes in the teleological supremacy of English colonialism, and its transformative energies in relation to the West Indies and its Black people. Here he is, with an unmistakable imperialist paternalism and English arrogance (which is also a form of ignorance), expressing his view of the ideal relationship that England ought to have with the West Indies:

But undoubtedly, wherever it is possible the principle of self-government ought to be applied in our colonies and will be applied, and the danger now is that it will be tried in haste in countries either as yet unripe for it or from the nature of things unfit for it. The liberties which we grant freely to those whom we trust and who do not require to be restrained, we bring into disrepute if we concede them as readily to perversity or disaffection or to those who, like most Asiatics, do not desire liberty, and prosper best when they are led and guided. (Froude 4)

That Froude hardly pauses to even consider the necessity for external control of the West Indies, proudly expressed as colonial governance, is as disturbing as his (mis)-understanding of human freedom – as that attribute which may or may not be “grante[d] freely to those whom we [the white English] trust and who do not require to be restrained.” The animalistic ungovernability of the Black Caribbean is, therefore, not only presupposed (those “who do not require to be restrained”), but even more, it is also deployed to justify and perpetuate colonial codes of domination proper. Worse still, this is so because – unlike the Asiatic, who is taken to be at least capable of unsupervised self-governance under certain circumstances – the Black Caribbean, being yet not fully Europeanised (“countries either as yet unripe for it or from the nature of things unfit for it”), remains unready for this type of responsibility and, thus, could only be detrimental and unproductive if left unattended by colonial administration. If what offends most about Froude’s words isn’t exactly the fact of the ease of their formation – and eventual publication – then it is certainly the intellectual impotence that seems to both generate and preserve them: in other words, Froude’s views fail not because of what they imply,

¹⁹ It is important to also note that Froude’s writes and travels in South Africa during his life. As such, it may be worthy to connect the Indies and South Africa to show a transnational (perhaps even anti-colonial) dialogue between these two spaces. Of course, this is what Victoria Collis-Buthelezi has tried to show in her recent reading of the Caribbean writer Eric Walrond’s poetics as being transnational as they are Pan-Caribbean: see, Collis-Buthelezi, Victoria J. “Caribbean Regionalism, South Africa, and Mapping New World Studies (2015)”.

but precisely because of the philosophy promoted in their very expression. That freedom is something to be “granted” and withheld at will, as Froude’s wants the English to believe, is as misleading as that thinking which wants to remove the Black Caribbean from historical narration. Put differently, colonialism of this Columbian-Hegelian continuum errs as much as an expression of a nation’s political consciousness, as it does as an explication of its intellectual ambitions. The crime is both political – with the atrocious treatment of the Caribbean and its Black people – as it is with the plain refusal to faithfully engage, on an epistemic level, with history and its evolution. To wit, if the colonialist may be charged with a political and historical impropriety, this too should be the case as regards the implementation of his reasoning faculties.

Similarly, in a more recent manifestation of this type of thinking – a case which strongly proves both the continuation of colonialism as it does the need for a sustained counter-hermeneutics designed in its vigorous opposition – Boris Johnson, then acting as British Foreign Secretary, eloquently enlightens us on his views of Africa. I quote him at length here, both for the clumsy preciseness of his remarks as for their relevance to my own discussion:

The problem is not that we were once in charge, but that we are not in charge anymore. Consider Uganda, pearl of Africa, as an example of the British record... The British planted coffee and cotton and tobacco, and they were broadly right... if left to their own devices, the natives would rely on nothing but the instant carbohydrate gratification of the plantain. You never saw a place so abounding in Bananas: great green barrel-sized bunches, off to be turned into matooke... The best fate for Africa would be if the old colonial powers, or their citizens, scrambled once again in her direction; on the understanding that this time they will not be asked to feel guilty.²⁰

If the above reads more like an excerpt from either Columbus’ diaries, or Hegel’s lectures – or even Froude’s travelogues – than it does as the considered political articulations of a contemporary, Eton College-Oxford University educated Foreign minister of one of the most politically and economically influential nations, this is, less a coincidence of personal politics that may exist between these four, than it is a confession of the continuing legacy of

²⁰ For the entire article from which comes the above quotation, one may see “The Boris Archive: Africa is a mess, but we can’t blame colonialism” as published in The Spectator (2002): <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2016/07/boris-archive-africa-mess-cant-blame-colonialism/>. It is perhaps also worth noting that this same (now almost two hundred years old) periodic was once, for a number of years (1999–2005), edited by Mr. Johnson himself.

colonialism in contemporary time. Johnson, in other words, is less joined to Columbus, Hegel, and Froude, by pure ideological chance as he is by a deliberate desire – here expressed as a futile pan-European nostalgic reverie – to preserve the cultural and political centrality of English imperialism in delineations of modernist history. This is due to the fact that, while colonial rhetoric gains quieter expression in later years, it nonetheless – because of an uninterrogated philosophical insistence on the erasure of the Black subject from what David Scott has called the “conscripts of modernity” – restages itself in the very attempts (liberal and otherwise) to be more inclusive of difference. An originally historical distortion, that is, culminates into a greater epistemic violence that, even as it periodically morphs into different, seemingly inclusive registers, ultimately continues the subjugation of Blackness and its entire history.

Moreover, as the work of Simon Gikandi has revealed – especially his recent *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011): the relationship between slavery and British culture is not only a co-constitutive and entwined one, but the former also comes to intrinsically shape Englishness and its notions of taste and refinement in ways that cannot be ignored in any honest endeavour toward the historiography-(ing) of modernity. There is, according to Gikandi, in English modernity – its mannerisms, mores, and practices – the inevitable influence of slavery, not as “the submerged and concealed counterpoint of modern civilization” (xii), but as the visible presence that both “informs and haunts” this modernity and its “sense and sensibility” – that, if ignored, also compromises our accounting of modernity. This, a reformulation of Frederic Jameson’s “expressive causality” and what he fruitfully calls “an undeniable causal relation,” leads one to appreciate that,

[S]lavery and the culture of taste were connected by the theories and practices that emerged in the modern period; [...]. ... these two experiences, though occupying opposite ends of the cultural spectrum, were, in their functions and affect, processes that took place at the same time in the same space and hence *need to be studied in what Edward Said has called a ‘contrapuntal manner’ and considered within the economy of what Fredric Jameson terms ‘expressive causality,’* the process by which ‘two distinct regions of social life,’ even when structurally unconnected, can still be considered to be a part of ‘some general identity’ especially at the phenomenological level. (*Culture of Taste* xiii [italics mine])

Any faithful reading of the history of modernity – English as well as that of general European consciousness – suffers greatly if also not accompanied by a complete recognition of this comutuality which, without necessarily being synchronic, nevertheless is a result of an irrefutable phenomenological interplay between slavery and Empire. If English modernity is the apotheosis of civility, then this is also primarily so because of the presence of slavery – and the attendant Black cultures this manages to preserve, remake, and even invent – and not, as Froude wants us to believe, in spite of this. The achievements of Gikandi's observations, still, are not limited to this epistemological level – the “what makes history, or how is history made?” anxiety – but also tend to want to extend into the areas that constitute the ethics and metaphysics of historiography. I simply mean by this, that it would be to perform only part of the requisite work to understand Gikandi as exclusively involved in the explication of a theory on the epistemology of history – that is, its documentation and representation – and not, at the same time, make room for an appreciation of how he seems concerned, equally if not greater, with the task of interrogating the very first principles traditionally invoked in the study of history as a concept. Put differently, in revealing the intimacies between slavery and Englishness, Gikandi also makes of modernist history – not only a question of knowledge (as it rightly is) – but one of how knowledge itself, at the even more elementary level of its conceptuality, is defined: what basic principles of logic, in other words, inform the exercise of formulating knowledge(s)?

The stakes are as political – concerned with history and its representation – as they are philosophical, always – through ethical and metaphysical objections – asking the literary-historian of modernity to reconsider the fullness of the instruments of his hermeneutics. Whereas Gikandi appears aware of this imperative, the same cannot be said of Froude who, having first presumed the illegitimacy of the Caribbean subject as a site of human freedom as measured by its apparent incapacity for self-governance, finally continues to declare the Caribbean as a land of complete *historylessness* inhabited by a no-people who, in the absence of White leadership, would only regress into a state of deplorable savagery. His account of the island of Grenada is especially telling:

The island belonged to England; we were responsible for what we made of it, and for the blacks' own sakes we ought not to try experiments upon them. They knew their own deficiencies, and would infinitely prefer a wise English ruler to any constitution which could be offered

them. If left entirely to themselves, they would, in a generation or two relapse into savages; there were are two alternatives before not Grenada only, but all the English West Indies—either an English administration pure and simple like the East Indian, or a falling eventually into a state like that of Hayti, where they eat the babies, and no white man can own a yard of land.

(Froude 72)

At least two things are expressed here, both equally indicative of a Western epistemic incapacity to deal with modern history in any reliable way: one, and already extensively considered herein, is the unproductive tendency by the Western historian to limit his conception of history to a set of binaries – and two, wherein also resides the advantages represented by Glissant’s and Walcott’s counter-poetics, is the related fact to arbitrarily infer – because of a phenomenological series that wants to challenge this binarist logic – a lack of historical value for the Caribbean subject. Froude, that is, in wanting to suggest that without the “white man” and his governance, the Black Grenadian people would only relapse (collapse even) into utter barbarism as would have been supposed the case with Haiti, also reveals that Western accounts of history cannot even begin to comprehend their continuities with the subject matter of C. L. R. James’ astute book *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), that is also the Haitian revolution. This inability, further, should assist in proving that, according to Western thought, not only are the actions of Black people defined by an ontological lacking and cannibalistic backwardness (“they eat their babies”), but that precisely because of this, they also reside outside of modern history. The irony, of course, is not the obvious English phobia for the Black person presented in Froude’s writing (as in the simplistic equation of their humanity with a crude cannibalism), but in the greater blindness to colonial brutality that permeates his entire analysis of the Black Grenadian. That it is indeed colonialism – its negating violence and dehumanisation, to borrow a Fanonian phrase – that precipitates these reactions (revolutions of the Haitian sort and their subsequent political and economic consequences) – is not only overlooked by Froude, but, in fact, the contrary is asserted: colonialism is here celebrated as the harbinger of good historical fortune for the Black Grenadian, a way out of his “pure and simple” imbecility and into an enlightened order of being as represented by the West.

It is certainly this form of historical analysis that inspires contemporary scholars like Gikandi et al. – and more for this part of the chapter – their intellectual forefathers (in more than one

sense of the word), the two Afro-Trinidadians, the intellectual and autodidact John Jacob Thomas (1841-1889) as well as the Pan-Africanist thinker and historian Cyril Lionel Robert James (1901-1989), to offer accounts which would seek to expose the falsities inherent in what I here refer to as the Columbian-Hegelian-Froudean historical schema. In their respective books, *Froudacity* (1889) and *The Black Jacobins*, Thomas and James – although from different (yet thematically consistent) positions and times – argue for the rethinking of this historical schema – positing, as does Thomas, that Black Caribbeans ought to recognise and realise the importance of their self-autonomy from the English or, as James shows in his study, that the Haitian revolution marks that very first step by which movement into this Black Caribbean freedom-space is made and, finally, physically and culturally actualised. That Thomas shows in his critique of Froude an ambiguous relationship to Christianity (therefore seemingly failing to recognise the ideological continuities between the former and slavery/imperialism), as crucially argues Bridget Brereton in her article “John Jacob Thomas: An Estimate,” is not as important as her other views on the man:

He was fiercely proud of his race, he was immensely interested in Africa, he perceived the links binding blacks in the New World with those in Africa, he had a concept of an ‘Afro-American’ community. In a sense he was a precursor of Garveyism and even Black power. (Brereton 22)

This, the type of racial pride and historical (even trans-historical) awareness of Blackness as an area of ontological and political relevance, is what the Western rubric of history seeks to deny and, therefore, becomes the task of the West Indian writer – like Thomas and James – to exhume and ultimately theorise anew. Still, whereas Thomas takes issue principally with Froude’s racist and pro-Empire stance in relation to the Caribbean, James (as I show shortly) is more interested in advocating for the historical significance of the Haitian revolution as, not only an event continuous with modernist history – and, therefore, critically inseparable from the latter – but also as a paradigmatic instantiation of Black political self-determination and philosophical independence. Both writers, that is – one concerned with the refutation of Froude’s thinking and the other with an explication of the Haitian Revolution’s political significance – ultimately succeed in the replacement of the Black subject into the narratology of modern history. To Thomas, the Black Caribbean – because of his relationship to imperial tradition and culture (admittedly, mainly in an unfavourable way) – is both a co-producer of

Englishness as he is of a decidedly Caribbean sensibility; something Froude appears unprepared to concede:

James Anthony Froude is, beyond any doubt whatever, a very considerable figure in modern English literature. It has, however, for some time ceased to be a question whether his acceptability, to the extent which it reaches, has not been due rather to the verbal attractiveness than to the intrinsic value and trustworthiness of his opinions and teachings. In fact, so far as a judgment can be formed from examined specimens of his writings, it appears that our author is the bond-slave of his own phrases. *To secure an artistic perfection of style, he disregards all obstacles, not only those presented by the requirements of verity but such as spring from any other kind of consideration whatsoever.* (Thomas 8-9, [italics mine,])

These “disregard[ed] obstacles,” of course, are as scholarly as they are historical – Froude’s work, according to Thomas, suffers not merely from a case of historical inattentiveness (a mostly scholastic issue), as it does from disciplinary dishonesty, a predominantly ethical concern that Thomas wants revisited by way of acknowledging, unlike Froude, “the [non-negotiable] requirements of verity.” Thomas’ argument, then, charges Froude both with a disregard for phenomenological truth as with a conceptual limitation which, because borne of an originally philosophical error – a binarist historiography – only manages to conceive of history in this anti-black fashion, even in spite of empirical evidence which would want to undermine this spurious historicism. In other words, what conjoins Thomas’ work with James’, I will briefly argue next, is their shared concern with the theorisation of history from the position of Blackness – strictly understood here in Michelle Wright’s broader sense as an “intersectional” set of collective identities, histories, and practices that constitute a category of ontology. A sort of Black history, if you like; useful for its ability to challenge Western historiological patterns as for its repurposing of our philosophical and political lexis as regards the Caribbean and its (Black) history.²¹

Anthony Bogues has previously argued, in *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectual* (2003), that the attempts by contemporary literary-historical scholarship have remained fully immersed in Western thought conventions, wherein even their ambitions

²¹ For a deeper discussion of this intersectional politics of Blackness, one may see page 3 of Michelle Wright: *The Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (2015). Also see *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2003). These texts are best read in conjunction.

towards the imagination of a new counter-hermeneutics unfortunately appear unable to dodge this critical framework:

Accounts of the present state of radical political thought are still embedded in a Western episteme that revolves around two historical events, the 1789 French Revolution and the 1917 Russian Revolution. Even those who proclaim the death of Eurocentrism still survey radical thought within these two historical exemplars. (Bogues 22)

What is made clear by Bogues' comments is the need to identify a problematic pattern that exists within Black radical politics itself – its heuristic tendencies, even as they aspire differently – to contain its critique of European thought within a Western episteme, as marked by those two Revolutions. A sort of criticism that undermines itself exactly by presupposing the critical centrality (and validity) of its object of debate. The blunder here, still, less a reification of these European moments (the French and Russian Revolutions) as the only legitimate temporal and conceptual signposts of modern history, than the attendant – and even more consequential mistake – of overlooking, for instance, the Haitian Revolution (and even slavery) as an equally (if not more) important marker of this history. Put differently, it is not the denial of these Western events that Bogues encourages for African radical scholarship and practice, this would be an act of academic dishonesty inconsistent with his initial desire to counter an erstwhile criminality, than the need to “open a small space for the reader to grapple with another source of radical theories and practices about human emancipation” (Bogues 22). It is worth emphasising the same point: in order to avoid “the confines of [this] epistemic silence of radical political thought,” the new African-(nist) scholar must necessarily locate his investigative energies elsewhere, in a set of phenomenologies and logical structures capable of centralising his events – like the Haitian Revolution (and later, the Grenada Revolution) – in his historicisation of his Caribbean condition.²² If Black literary practice, more importantly, is to broaden its conceptual and practical reach, this can be achieved – not merely by a rebuttal of Western historiography and its vagaries – but by an attempt to move its available discursive protocols into those sites hitherto denied full expression. This, in turn, aids not only in the repositioning of the Black subject and his experiences in modern history, as it does with the

²² In his book, Bogues considers the various contributions of a few Africanist scholars: Quobna Cugoana, Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Julius Nyerere, Walter Rodney, and Bob Marley. His work, in other words, is meant to be both transnational and interdisciplinary. This, similarly, is the main assumption made by my own discussions here: the study of the Caribbean necessarily invites this type of scholarly methodology.

irreplaceable necessity to invent new first principles with which to conceive of history itself, from a more comprehensive point of view, as represented by the Caribbean and its materialities.

This, of course, is the advantage represented by James' study – Bogues is too keenly aware of this, and in his book even dedicates a chapter to the former, "C.L.R. James and W.E.B. Du Bois: Heresy, Double Consciousness, and Revisionist Histories:" he is able to identify, and further explicate, the critical value of considering Caribbean history, not from the typical axes of the two European Revolutions, but from the Haitian Revolution as both center and catalyst of modern history. In other words, these "revisionist histories," become so only by the degree to which they also exhibit a philosophical and discursive intimacy with the Haitian Revolution and the latter's implications for both the historicisation of the Caribbean and the conceptualisation of history itself. What David Scott calls the "theory-problem" of Haiti is here helpful. Where he probes, in his paper "The Theory of Haiti: *The Black Jacobins* and the Poetics of Universal History:" "through what narrative and topological devices does James construct Haiti as a theory-problem?" I make a somewhat related enquiry: what are the conceptual implications of framing the Haitian Revolution within a rubric of modern history – and vice versa? And, on an even more basic level, what happens to the process of the framing of history itself when approached from this position? Alternatively, if one likes, is framing (an *already politicised* device) even a methodologically optimal way of conceptualising Caribbean history?

At the very heart of mine, Bogues' and Scott's analyses, is a form of scepticism which orients itself interrogatively in relation to the question of the documentation of modern history: the archiving of modern history, in other words, being originally corrupted by a set of politicised presuppositions, is neither an innocent practice, nor are its conclusions – therefore – infallibly guaranteed. Modern history is not an axiomatically valid phenomenon, its truth, rather, lies in the very interactions (and contestations) of many truths and falsities (both congruent and disparate) which would want to claim authentic expression of its nature. What this means simply is that James' reading of the Haitian Revolution – whether as "revisionist history" (Bogues position), or as "theory-problem" as is the contention of Scott – enables for the entry of this event (and its protagonists) into modernist historical discourse in a way that *unsilences* (or revocalises) the Black subject. This is James' summation of the problem: "except for a few half-hearted attempts by the Friends of the Negro, *everyone conspired to forget the slaves*" (James 70, [italics mine]). It is this conspiracy – this plotting with, in, and out of history – by French

colonialism as by general Western historicism, that James wants to expose – thereby allowing for the evolvement (and involvement) of the Black Caribbean subject, like Toussaint, from a state of savage silence into one of expressive – politically, ontologically, and culturally – modern historical importance.

The Black Caribbean subject, therefore, emerges into modernity not as a silence – not as an “absence” without either historical or ontological status – but more as a necessary element in the very production of this historical space. Unsilenced, as Toussaint’s story and James’ reading of it attest, this Black subject not only contests for her historical recognisability – her very inclusion within an existing paradigm of historiography – but also, through this very recognition, insists on the revisitation of these historiographical methods. In other words, what Gikandi, James, Bogue, et al. envision is never merely the assimilationist replacement of the Black person within the epistemic and historical sites of Western thinking – and its continuum of problematic binaries and hierarchies – rather, the mission is here to recognise that the concept of history (and its recording, as well as coding) is an exercise whose validity is not essentially pre-given, but always constructed under those contingent elements of imaginative and subjective interpretation of facts. This is so because, the project itself – never ever to be informed by an *a priori* logic, depends rather on a recognition of a set of *a posteriori* conditions for its critical effectiveness:

[T]he problem of narrative form is also allied to a central problem of the philosophy of history: Is historical representation an accurate description of events? [...]. Perhaps if one argues that there is no *direct* representation of the past, then it might be possible to operate with a conception of *historical truth*. Such a truth recognizes that its basis is interpretative and that while technical skills are applied to archives, the very act of historical writing is itself an imaginative one. The essential difference between *historical truth* and fiction is that archives act as an anchor and a trace of the past, informing and giving body to historical writings. (Bogue 73)

What must be taken from Bogue’s statements, still, less their ability to emphasise the invaluable point that history – because it supervenes as much on the imagination as it does on a “conception of historical truth” – is always subject to critical misrepresentation and, often, even outright distortion, but that, because of this, fiction itself – its very literariness and creativeness – becomes a valid site of historical (and historiographical) documentation and

negotiation. It is in shifting this historiographical code, in other words, from its exclusively archival registers into the fictional and creative ones that the conception of history is rendered re-imaginable, and with this, the specific history of the Caribbean *re-memberable* (perhaps even recordable). The work of the West Indian writer, then, if it is concerned with the narrativity of history – basically, with how history is told – it is so equally with the “philosophy of history.” It is with this, the latter philosophical responsibility, as I now turn to demonstrate in the following chapter, that both Glissant and Walcott – through both their critical and creative work – are concerned. Theirs is not only a “quarrel with history” as it also is a philosophical intervention concerned with the ethics of *literalising* history through the literary and fictional. The recognition here, finally, is that fiction – because it prefers to experiment with both form and content – also allows for, not an experimentation per se, but a reconceptualisation (or *reconceptability*) of history. Literature – specifically the essay and the poem, for my arguments – becomes not only an exterior to this archive, but an archive in and of itself; or more carefully, an archiving instrument capable of re-historicising the Caribbean.

Chapter Two:

How can the history of this West Indian futility be written? What tone shall the historian adopt? [...]. The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.

– *The Middle Passage*, V.S. Naipaul.

Where the accusations of a Caribbean “historylessness,” as has been the contention of the foregoing chapter, have traditionally come from the West, this is not the same as saying that the West Indian writer has not – from time to time, for whatever reasons – similarly suffered from a related disenchantment. This is true, in particular, of the Trinidadian writer, V.S. Naipaul who, in his book *The Middle Passage* (1962), not only expresses this anxiety, but continues – as the epigraphs (epithet even) evinces – to conclude that the West Indies is a land defined by a nothingness. What Naipaul calls “nothing,” while *prima facie* ideologically similar to the Hegelian-Columbian-Froudean historical schema sketched out above, I argue, is nonetheless markedly different in its critical and philosophical ramifications. What I mean by this is, it will not be helpful to receive Naipaul in the same tradition of other Western thinkers, as his is a unique “pessimism,” if you like, imbued with the generative capacity – as Walcott’s response to the former’s thoughts will help show – for the Caribbean literary-historian. I should then state, right at the outset, that as I consider the views of Naipaul here, it is less with the same attitude shown by Edward Baugh – who appears to want to ideologically pair Naipaul with Froude. This is not my approach at all! Rather, I am more interested in Naipaul’s other enquiry: “How can the history of this West Indian futility be written?” The latter, for my own work, is a hermeneutically more useful question – statement even, as I would argue – than the suggested historical nihilism in Naipaul’s views. This is because, while a reading of *The Middle Passage* that insists on investigating this historical nihilism properly achieves a location of this sensibility within Caribbean writing itself – thus appreciably forewarning us of a theoretical

and critical complacency – it also misses, because it remains satisfied with its initial accomplishments, the opportunity of seeing the book (*The Middle Passage*) as, itself, a reworking of this historylessness. A reworking, in fact, of modern history proper. In other words, whereas it is instructive to charge Naipaul with a historical nihilism – as correctly does Baugh – this should not obfuscate the associated truth that, in writing out the Caribbean as without history, Naipaul – whether knowingly or not – also involves himself in its (re)-historicisation. His mistake, that is, if it would confirm a former bias against the Caribbean, also (perhaps too paradoxically) finally functions towards a revaluing of this space. In other words, it should not be the exactness (or lack thereof) of his pronouncements that preoccupies us most, but precisely the very act – ideologically and practically consequential – of writing of the Caribbean and enquiring after the historiographical methods available to the literary-historian of this space.

If Naipaul's misreading is embarrassing yet, this is not tragically so – as one may easily redeem him from this blunder by recognising that, writing from a position of historical resignation and dissatisfaction with general Caribbean politics and poetics, he would have been encouraged to reach such quasi-nihilistic conclusions. Still, this is not to excuse him per se, as it is an opportunity to force a probe into the possible causes of this disenchantment. In other words, it is less interesting to dismiss Naipaul as a pessimist without any useful contribution to Caribbean studies – not that this is the case anyway, (but it easily may be) – rather, we ought, in lieu, to be encouraged into a deeper investigation of the phenomenological background that would have informed his critical impetuosity and expressive recklessness. It is here, and this is Walcott's intelligence, that perhaps rests our key to the re-construction of modern history as a concept expressive of a Caribbean positionality. Unlike Naipaul before him, who prefers to read this historical obscurity (note: *not* void, but obscurity) as an end itself – thereby prematurely necessitating a declaration of what may be called a Caribbean historical finality (and futility) – Walcott sees in this loss of history, not a result, but a generative beginning: “in the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered, what has mattered is the loss of history, the *amnesia* of races, *what has become necessary is imagination*, imagination as necessity, as invention” (Walcott 6, [italics mine]). That is, whereas the former moves into a position of historical pessimism precipitated – in the main – by an over-determining materialism in his analysis of the Caribbean (“and nothing was created in the West Indies”), the latter, because of a desire to

transcend this mostly Eurocentric materialist account, manages to convert this absence (“amnesia”) into a productive presence (“imagination”). It is, in other words, through the imaginative faculty – as I will be arguing, its experimental capacity for both myth and conjecture – that Walcott is able to declare the Caribbean as not only with(in) history, but as also a philosophically useful site of historical creation and conceptualisation.

Similarly, where Glissant talks of the idea of *opacity* – what Celia M. Britton helpfully theorises as the “Other’s opacity” – one should accept this, even if it does so in a different manner, as echoing (improving even) Walcott’s notion of amnesia. To Glissant, as illuminatingly read by Britton, opacity refers to that capacity to remain both individualised and irreducible. It is, more favourably, this capacity for individuality and irreducibility that allows the Black Caribbean subject to dodge a Western historiographical homogeneity, while enabling him to create a critical set of his own histories, poetics, and politics. Glissant’s counsel is as accessible as it is insightful:

[T]o develop everywhere, in defiance of a universalizing and reductive humanism, the theory of specifically opaque structures. In the world of cross-cultural relationships, which takes over from the homogeneity of the single culture, to accept this opaqueness – that is, the irreducible density of the other – is to truly accomplish, through diversity, a human objective. Humanity is perhaps not the ‘image of man’ but today the evergrowing network of recognized opaque structures. (*Caribbean Discourse* 133)

Glissant’s final aim, still, it must be noted, is not exclusively with the unstrategic celebration of this cross-cultural opacity – not, that is to say, with the mere recognition of a heterogeneous otherness that individuates the Caribbean – than it is also with the pursuit, informed by a recognition of this opacity, for a historical and ontological freedom for the Black Caribbean people: “their inscrutability [opacity], which is nothing, after all, but their freedom” (256). Therefore, in speaking of this opacity, Glissant wants, too, to speak of a particular freedom which, without wishing to circumvent this inscrutability, actually depends upon it for its actualisation, its functional *realisation* in the Caribbean. This inscrutability, put differently, becomes the very foundation of a freeing recognisability; in fact, as Britton continues, it is this very “defense against [Western] *understanding*,” that is, this opacity, which permits the Black Caribbean subject entry into his freedom. Tellingly evoking Fanon’s thematicisation of a

reductionist “epidermal racial schemata” in the latter’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) – wherein the sight of the black body is also its (mis)-sighting (and, consequently, its *mis-citing*), because of the beholding gaze’s predetermined racial range – Glissant, this time writing in *Poetics of Relation* (2006), continues to make a similar point as regards the theorisation of the Caribbean subject:²³

If we look at the process of ‘understanding’ beings and ideas as it operates in western society, we find that it is founded on an insistence on this kind of transparency. In order to ‘understand’ and therefore accept you, I must reduce your density to this scale of conceptual measurements which gives me a basis for comparisons and perhaps for judgements. (*Poetics of Relation* 204)

In other words, the customary practice – by Western historiography and, in general, its paradigms of conceptuality – to presuppose the inviolable validity of its own vocabularies and taxonomies in seeking to understand these sites of otherness (like the Caribbean), errs not only for the critical arrogance of its protocols, which would want to shield it from any type of external interrogation, but also for the untenable insistence on the reducibility of the Caribbean subject. Another way of saying this is, the violation committed by this “understanding” is as much an expression of its conceptual incompleteness as it is of the former’s incompatibility with other forms of knowing, of Caribbean epistemai proper. There is, more finally, something *un-understandable* about the Caribbean and its subjects, that – in our insistence on approaching these through the methodological framework of Western thought – we risk further obscuring, thus missing the chance to appreciate their contributory energies to modern history. This, “the right to opacity,” – to ungraspability, to incomprehensibility, to irreducibility – is also the first step towards a Caribbean poetics, what J. Michael Dash alternatively calls a move “towards a theory of ‘Antillanite’” (*Édouard Glissant* 126).

If I deploy these two tropes – amnesia and opacity – in this fashion, it is not only for the fact of their ideological compatibility (both move in the general direction of imagining a specifically Caribbean historicity) as it also is with their useful suggestion that literature – the literary, more openly – is as historical as it is a vehicle for other historicisms. The literary work of Glissant

²³ For a more comprehensive discussion of this Fanonian trope of the “epidermally” reduced and reducible Black see Lewis Gordon’s *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (1995). My own understanding of this dynamic is informed by Gordon’s theorisation in that text.

and Walcott, as I argue in this chapter, is important for its historical (and philosophical) intervention – the conceptualisation of history – as it is for the *poeticisation of history*, or even vice versa, the *historicisation of poetics*. The otherwise preferred distinction between history and poetics is here not only usurped by a thinking that rather promotes a recognition of the coextensiveness of these two theory-practices, but – on an even more politically important level – this poetics is here shown to be an archive which, whether he wishes so or not, the Caribbean writer adopts (and accordingly adapts) in the treatment of his history. This is so because, as notes Dash, “Glissant observes that the awareness of history and politics inevitably intrudes on the process of literary creation.” As I argue herein, still, not only is this intrusion “inevitable,” but it is also necessary: history and politics are, to the Caribbean writer, as literary as are his poetic and novelistic productions.

The goal, however, is not to erect a symbiosis between these two spaces – that’s another question, of which I concern myself only passingly here. Rather, my basic thesis is that only in acknowledging this relationship, as coextensive and not oppositional, can the Caribbean writer’s work be appreciated in a way that grants access into his other thematic concerns – those questions, as I show in my reading of both Glissant’s and Walcott’s poetry, about the nature itself of this writer’s work, the relationship between poetic language and Caribbean landscape, and finally, that of literary practice in diasporic/postcolonial cultural criticism. My central argument in this chapter must, therefore, be understood as follows: because of the experimental nature of Caribbean writing (perhaps even reading), poetic and otherwise, this writing necessarily escapes traditional literary treatments – and, in fact – would appear to want both to offer itself as an alternative to these literary-critical regimes, while showing a practical continuity with them that reveals the former’s unchallenged biases and shortcomings. Less a meditation on the exactness of the differences between these praxis, my discussions rather concern themselves more with an outlining of the achievements promised by the reading I advance. The reader, in other words, is implored to focus more on the envisioned consequences of this different hermeneutic I theorise herein, than on its differing from previous models. The latter concern, by its very nature, being presupposed by the former exercise.

Accordingly, it is my initial contention here that both writers inevitably – at one point or another in their illustrious writing careers – preoccupy themselves with the conception of history and its reappropriation (and reappropriability) in the creation of their respective (and

related) literary voices. To fully focus my discussion, yet, I want to particularly examine five texts by these writers, viz.: “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry” (1974), *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (including both the “The Muse of History” (originally published in 1974) and the eponymous essay title (originally published in 1957)) (1998), and the “The Schooner *Flight*” by Walcott and, by Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation* (2006) and *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (1989), and *The Collected Poems of Édouard Glissant* (2005). I do not, of course, mean to propose that these, and that only these texts, deal with the questions of history and the Caribbean experience. Nor is it my intention to limit my discussion to them, or to the theme of history. Rather, as will later become abundantly clearer, these – in my estimation – are the texts which best exemplify the treatments of history, poetic language, and literary practice envisioned by both writers. How I want to measure this, moreover, is less by the (*un*)-popularity of these texts as by the degree to which all, considered both separately and as a unit, speak – in ways both direct and not – to the broader thematic concerns of the Caribbean space as well as to the intellectual genealogy represented by this writing. Therefore, my isolation of these is as much a literary and philosophical preference – that is, an appreciation of their ability to engage certain subjects with both an obvious writerly excellence as with consistent logical acuity – as it is a recognition of their historico-political import in relation to other leitmotifs that continue to arrest the literary imagination of Caribbean writers today.²⁴ Both writers, furthermore, refuse to provincialise their discussions merely to the arena of history – always opting, instead, to see history as both permeating and permeated by the congruent concerns of slavery, race and racial identity, the politics of language and landscape, the role of imagination in literary production, and the question of Caribbean subjectivity in a diasporic and postcolonial context. This – the revaluing of history by way of both expunging and expanding its documenting and documentation proper – I will finally show, is both their scholarly advantage as it is their political and historical import.

My other preoccupation, related to the first, is with their poetic voices – or, less generally – their poetry as exemplary instantiations of what Anthony Reed calls “black experimental writing” in his recent, meticulous study of black avant-gardist poetics, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (2014). Here, I primarily concern myself with a reading of their literary work – anthologised beautifully in *The Collected Poems of Édouard Glissant* (2005,

²⁴ I have in mind the various work of contemporary Caribbean writers; Jamaica Kincaid, Claudia Rankine, Kwesi Johnson, and Edwidge Danticat, to name just a few. These writers have, in one way or the other, all continued the same critical enquiries in their respective work.

translated from the French into English by Jeff Humphries and Melissa Manolas) and in Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970) and "The Schooner *Flight*" (1973) – which, informed by Reed's ingenious discussion of Black experimental writing, I want to show, also helps see them as both poetic and historical deliberations on what David Scott calls the "Caribbean question." While, naturally, I make many movements outside of these primary texts into other of their works, *Derek Walcott: Selected Poems* (2007) in the case of Walcott and only fleetingly the novel *La Lezarde* (1958) from Glissant, this is done so as not to detract from the discursive importance of the aforementioned primary texts, as it is to help bolster my own reading of them by supplementing these with related sources. It is both futile and misleading to read Glissant's anthology and Walcott's play and poetry in their isolation, as it is to read Caribbean writing in isolation of the historical and political questions it necessarily speaks from, to, and against. For these reasons, then, the overlaps to be inevitably encountered herein are as natural as they necessary.

Similarly, where there may appear to be discursive overlays between my treatments of the (strictly) critical with the (strictly) creative, this is because – by its very nature – the present examination requires that the uncritical valorisation of the analytical neatness (otherwise held as unproblematic) drawn between these two be replaced by a more careful hermeneutics, one which recognises this generic and functional slipperiness as important to the construction of a Caribbean – and to an extent, diasporic and postcolonial – cultural criticism. In other words, if the reader is able to take anything away from this chapter, that should be his ability to realise that Caribbean poetics, even as it speaks from and around existing literary practices, this is normally done so by way of both expanding these traditions – as is the case mainly with Walcott's poetry – and inventing totally new systems of textual-analysis (Glissant is more useful here).²⁵ Ultimately, if this chapter achieves anything, it should be its contribution to the type of scholarship that sees Caribbean writing as not only historiographically relevant – this remains hard to disprove – but also as capable of generating its own literary and critical codes: not a solipsistic literary criticism yet, but a Pan-Caribbean one with its often diasporic permutations.

²⁵ Jahan Ramazani has argued for a similar point in relation to Walcott's work: see, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (2001) and *A Transnational Poetry* (2015). Charles W. Pollard makes a set of related arguments in *New World Modernism: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite* (2004). While different from theirs, my view of Walcott's poetry sympathises with some of their conclusions about this writer and his complex relation to the Canon of Western modernism.

The Critic, the Poet: Theorising Caribbean Writing:

I wish to begin, because of my main contention that Caribbean poetry is unavoidably experimental in nature, with a consideration of Reed's discussion of Black experimental writing. In *Freedom Time*, Reed – as he puts it – attention to the experimentality of Black writing reminds “us of the complicity of the historical archive with the violence that produced it and historicizing our present *concepts of temporality and value* through their emergence in the management of the transatlantic slave trade” (Reed 2, [italics mine]). Reed's words must be read very carefully here; he is not taking issue with history per se, as he is with the ritual of historicisation, rightly suggesting its complicity in what the Indian intellectual, Gyan Prakash, has called the “epistemic violence” of the Western canon. Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak,” theorises this violence as that “remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as the Other” and, furthermore, that “[t]his project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of the Other in its precarious Subjectivity” (Spivak 24). Simply, what Reed calls the Western historical archive produces its violence exactly by the attendant (“asymmetrical”) negation of the other's senses of ontology and reality – “our present concepts of temporality and value.” Both Spivak and Reed – one through the appropriation of a regional subalternity and the other, by way of a Black experimental poetics – ultimately succeed in intimating at the need for a different historicising archive, one which would eschew this violence properly by – if you will – allowing the subaltern to speak. I pair these two here as I believe that their suggestions, combined as I have tried to do above, reiterate one of Walcott's most perceptive remarks, quoted here at length:

Colonials, we began with this malarial enervation: that nothing could ever be built among these rotting shacks, barefooted back yards and moulting shingles; that being poor, we already had the theatre of our lives. So the self-infected role of martyr came naturally, the melodramatic

belief that one was message bearer for the millennium, that the inflamed ego was enacting their will. In that simple schizophrenic boyhood one could lead two lives: the interior life of poetry, the outward life of action and dialect. Yet the writers of my generation were natural assimilators. We knew the literature of empires, Greek, Roman, British, through their essential classics; and both the patios of the street and the language of the classroom hid the elation of discovery. If there was nothing, there was everything to be made. With this prodigious ambition one began. ("What the Twilight Says" 4)

According to Walcott here, not only can the Black Caribbean subject – now squarely subaltern – speak (the "message bearer for the millennium"), but he can do so only through an expressive ambivalence (a "schizophrenic boyhood") that mixes both the energies "of the street and the language of the classroom." His speech, yet, is not only a politicised element – purely the words of subalternity – but also a result of an experimental poetics which, by joining the "Greek, Roman, British" with the Caribbean emergent ("the elation of discovery"), manages to construct a new "everything".²⁶ It is this pursuit of a creative "everything," itself a result of an experimental poetics – one which mixes the old (the Western) and the new (the subaltern Caribbean) – that allows Walcott to rewrite the history of the Caribbean. History here is rewritten not by a rejection of these Western influences, but by an adaptation of them, which while it recognises them, only does so with the strategic aim of eventually undermining their claims to an epistemic absolutism. This, to Walcott, is an impossible position and, therefore, one which invites urgent remaking, and remarking.

In *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (1992), Gikandi makes a similarly substantial observation about this particular relationship between Caribbean poetics and modernity. As he frames it,

Caribbean writers cannot adopt the history and culture of European modernism, especially as defined by the colonizing structures, but neither can they escape from it because it has overdetermined Caribbean cultures in many ways. Moreover, for peoples of African and Asian descent, the central categories of European modernity – history, national, language, subjectivity – have value only when they are fertilised by figures of the 'other' imagination which colonialism has sought to repress. (*Writing in Limbo* 4-5)

²⁶ Think, for example, of the epic poem *Omeros* (1990) here as Walcott's experimental art which mixes the 'classical' with the new (the modern) in order to construct a Pan-Caribbean poetics.

It is, still, not a simple desire for *mimicry* (fully embodied by the “mimic man,” in Naipaul’s view) which informs this poetics – that is, not an assimilationism that seeks admittance (into the Western canon) for the Caribbean poet. Rather, it is the recognition of an undeniable continuity between modernity and the Caribbean which, if it would challenge the exclusivity of a Western historiography, must also acknowledge the Caribbean’s filiation to this modernity. What Walcott does to this accusation of mimicry, as a response to “Mr. Naipaul’s” indictment, is – through what may be easily misconstrued as an unproductive display of semiotic gymnastics – turn it unto itself by way of repopulating this idea of “nothingness” with a more celebratory and procreant quality. The specialness of the Caribbean, its creative specialness, is ironically also its relationship to a historical nothingness – or, in Walcottian terms, its relationship to an amnesiac productivity. The sharpness of Walcott’s rebuttal is here worth acknowledging:

Precisely, precisely. We created nothing, but that is to move from anthropological absurdity to pseudo-philosophical rubbish, to discuss the reality of nothing, the mathematical conundrum of zero and infinity. Nothing will always be created in the West Indies, for quite long time, because what will come out of there is like nothing one has ever seen. (*Culture or Mimicry* 9)

Nothingness, in other words, is amnesia turned creativity, turned – finally, through the process of literary imagination – everything. The objective, yet, is not to blindly celebrate this “pseudo-philosophical rubbish” as it is to realise that what initially appears a vacuity, because it refuses any Western historiographical graspability (and literary-representational reductionism) – must also function as a site of original conceptuality. However, this is not to essentialise the Caribbean by suggesting that only it can possess these regenerative capacities – this would, alas, only serve to restage the former problem. Rather, the point is this: because of this amnesiac property (induced as much by colonialism as by slavery) the Caribbean writer is better suited – like the general diasporic subaltern polity – to respond to this nothingness with fuller creativity. He is not born with this creative quality; instead, through his history (of creolisation and relationality, for instance) – and his historylessness, in fact – comes to articulate himself mainly through its registers. It is not newness that the Caribbean offers, but the conditions for the expression of this comprehensive and cogent newness.

This theorisation of Walcott's idea of amnesia as a trope of a generative creativity which usefully converts nothingness into everything may be seen as an articulation of Antonio Gramsci's related discussion of the "incubatory" quality of revolutionary societies and their politics (poetics). It is perhaps Homi Bhabha who provides the most convincing understanding of this Gramscian notion when the former writes that, according to Gramsci, "any turning point, ... , can only be experienced as an 'incubation' of temporalities, old and new, past and present" (Bhabha 348). Similarly, what Walcott considers "the theatre of [Caribbean] lives" may be seen – using this Gramscian model of what Walter L. Adamson has called "a new culture in incubation" – as that point whereby the imagination of a new historicity and its poetics (and politics) is first announced, then finally enacted. While the Marxist Gramsci eventually continues to seek "a coherent resolution" – some form of socio-economical finality – to this incubatory moment, the St. Lucian poet appears more satisfied with its ability to fruitfully centralise imagination in the negotiation of these overlapping temporalities and their multiple histories. Incubation, as understood through this Walcottian amnesiac ideal – although related to Gramsci's thinking (yet not exactly synonymous with it) is, finally, separated by its fundamental allegiances to the faculty of imagination as an integral component to a Caribbean poetics. In fact, when Walcott proclaims that "mimicry is an act of imagination" (*Culture or Mimicry* 10), what he also means is that – because mimicry is borne of an ideological (historical and poetical) intimacy with amnesia – it too, like imagination, functions as site of an incubatory potentiality. Of course, the proposal here is not that Walcott's thinking is overdetermined by a Marxist dialectic – a worthy enquiry in itself, the engagement of which, alas, is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, this rumination has merely wanted to suggest that, through his conception of a Caribbean amnesia, Walcott has been able to reconceive of the historicisation process of the Caribbean and, on an even more consequential note, the very materialisation – basically, the making physical on the socio-historical level – of a Caribbean poetics. Walcott, while not necessarily a Marxist (he does presuppose a teleological element to his discussion, after all,) nonetheless closely resembles its attributes when he imbues imagination with a materialist incubatory propensity.

This, of course, will be particularly true of any reading of Walcott's play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, especially where this reading seeks to highlight the advantages of mimicry as both political and literary strategy. It is no coincidence that Bhabha, who is influenced by Fanon – who in turn, also influences Glissant, the latter of which would have been in some form of

influential “relation” with Walcott – theorises mimicry in a way that has remained essential to both Caribbean and postcolonial criticism.²⁷ I return to him here with a similar recognition of his especial contribution to Caribbean cultural and literary criticism. In his essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” (1984), Bhabha tells us that,

[t]he authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I [Bhabha] have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both “normalized” knowledges and disciplinary powers. (“Of Mimicry and Man” 126)

Mimicry, in this Bhabhaist rendition, works both for the preservation of colonial authority and – through one side of its double reflex – towards the potential undoing of this episteme. It is defined, in other words, by a dual ethics for both colonial confirmation and a revolutionary restructuring of this order – it is, properly, “an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.” This model, for instance, may easily be applied to the character of Makak in *Dream* who, through the white mask that he always wears, comes first to embody this “double articulation” and then, later – through Walcott’s insistence on his amnesiac imagination tool – emphasise this articulation’s capacities to undo the colonial racist gaze; its functional simultaneity, that is, located between a doing and a disarticulation. Makak, who in the play religiously mimics everything done by Corporal Lestrade – the metonymic expression of colonial power – also, through this mimicry, appears to want to “mock” (to undo) this authority: “Everything I say this monkey does do, I don’t know what to say this monkey won’t do. I sit down, monkey sit down too, I don’t know what to say this monkey won’t do” (*Dream* 223). To be sure, still, while – as Patrick Hogan rightly identifies, “when Makak looks

²⁷ Celia M. Britton has been able to trace these ideological affiliations neatly in her study of Glissant, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (1999). There, she rightly tells us that “[t]he sense ... that Glissant inhabits the same general intellectual world as the Anglophone postcolonial theorist is thus perhaps explicable in terms of their debt to French theory and the indirect links that this creates between their work and that of Glissant. There are also more specific connections, such as that provided by Fanon, for example, through his eclectic use of Marxism, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis; his prominence in Bhabha’s work; and his influence on Glissant (Britton 4)”. Such a transnational poetics is, it must be noted, a worthy site of future intellectual enquiry.

at himself, he sees what a white racist sees” (Hogan 108) – this form of mimicry is defined by its potentiality towards a political disarticulation, as it equally is so by a *relationality* to this very structure of articulation (and confirmation, and even negation). Moreover, Makak not only internalises this racial complex, but – through a performance of its repetitiveness (or its repeatability) – also appears to want to permanently actualise it as his ontological reality, exactly by defending it. The irony, of course, is that this attempted transmission of ontological value from Blackness (his very face as site of morphological/epidermal fixity) to whiteness (the mask as an aspirational politics of being) is inevitably attended to by an erasure – a negative articulation proper – of even the possibilities of his ontological actuality. There is another way of expressing this, because Makak partakes of an original form of self-negation, this inevitably precipitates his adoption (a mimetic socialisation and internalisation) of anti-blackness – such that his authentic image, quite paradoxically, can only depend upon this poetics of performativity.

To wit, this is that peculiar phenomenon, in which the assertion of a Black Caribbean selfhood results, not in the insertion of this self into the dominant colonial landscape, but in a violation of that very self’s epistemological and ontological value, itself always a futurist potentiality obscured by a present nothingness. Mimicry here bars Makak, that is, from ever actualising his identity outside of the colonial code. In overdetermining his visibility – that is, in ceaselessly confining him within a polarised calculus between his epidermal reality vs. his unrealisable white humanity – this colonial language can only return his ontological quotient, his human value, as a form of racial foreclosure. This is indeed a staged, often restaged, and finally perpetually restageable rejection of Caribbean selfhood, so to speak: “[b]lackness have accepted and internalised the racism which reduces them to shadows” (Hogan 108). This shadow, the corporeal (perhaps *corporealised*) figure of Makak, is first relegated to its Black epidermal construction, and then vainly endeavours to lay claim to an elusive sense of whiteness – through a series of mimetic machinations – only to be ultimately forsaken into a space of ontic precariousness, and often even complete ontic quietism. But, as Fred Moten usefully tells us in his paper, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh):” “if the slave is, in the end and in essence, *nothing*, what remains is the necessity of an investigation of that nothingness” (“Blackness and Nothingness” 744, [italics mine]). To Moten, as to Walcott and Bhabha before him – and unlike Abdul JanMohamed, whom the former sees as involved in a sort of Afro-pessimism – black performance (mimicry), now strictly understood as a zone of

nothingness – must be investigated into a recognition of its life-affirming potential, its imaginative advantage (if you're Walcott) or its ambivalent articulateness (if you're Bhabha).²⁸ The suggestion, simple as it is also discerning, is that the condition of the slave – like that of Makak in Walcott's play – while defined by a nothingness, manages, in spite of this very fact and often because of it (and the attendant poetics of performance), to approximate a level of ontological worth that both emancipates it from a colonial rubric of identity (from non-being) while repositioning it centrally in the imagination of its own emergent codes and taxonomies of being and "becoming Black."

Indeed, Moten here appears to be reformulating Bhabha's thinking; especially the latter's suggestion that it is mainly through this doubleness, this "double articulation," that the black subject (let's say Makak) manages to reinscribe its own human value onto both political and literary modernities. It is important, however, to note that what is being said here is not simply that Blackness is always at an ontological remove – at the level of pure performance (and reaction) – but, more usefully, that these poetics of performativity, given their strategic deployment(ability), always work towards the appropriative re-valuing of Blackness itself, exactly because they also seek to destabilise the colonial episteme. Michelle Wright has echoed a related point in her study, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*: "The mask does not so much signal Black performance ... as mark the moment at which the idealist dialectic of the white subject and Black Other breaks down. Equally important, it marks the simultaneous emergence of the Black subject denied by that very first idealist [i.e., colonial] thinking" (Wright 68). One can think of it differently thus: Blackness (Makak) now as either a performative nothingness – as Moten accedes – or as an (anti)-colonial double expressivity of the Bhabhaist sort – always through these tropes exhibits its proclivity in relation to a useful definition of itself, as neither absence nor negation, but as ontology's positive potentiality (as *difference*). This is how Moten, now in his book, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black radical Tradition* (2002), chooses to express a correlated matter by way of ably summarising Saidiya Hartman's impressive thinking on the hypervisibility of the Black subject:

²⁸ It remains debatable whether Moten's characterisation of JanMohamed as "Afro-pessimist" is a valid one or not, let alone a helpful one for my purposes. What remains insightful, yet, is the former's ability – like Walcott and Glissant – to show that only through such an investigation of this apparent "nothingness" can the Black subject begin to ontologically and historically announce itself as a presence, and not just as an absence.

She [Hartman] allows and demands an investigation of this hypervisibility in its relation to a certain [...] obscurity and opens us to the problematics of everyday ritual, the stagedness of the violently (and sometimes amelioratively) quotidian, the essential drama of black life, She allows us to ask: what have objectification and dehumanization, both of which we can think in relation to a certain notion of subjection, to do with the essential historicity, the quintessential modernity ...? (*In The Break* 1-2)

Hypervisibility, theorised herein as the result of a dialectical relationship between “spectacle and spectatorship (*In The Break* 1),” must also be understood as thematically synonymous with his later idea of nothingness. What differentiates the two, yet, is that whereas the trope of nothingness is defined more accurately as an absence – as an ontological and historical emptiness only with a delayed futurist potentiality – hypervisibility rather takes the excesses and slippages of Blackness and appropriates them towards an aggressive negation of the Black subject. While nothingness wants to deny the very capacity for Black ontological definition, hypervisibility recognises this Blackness (and its excesses) only as sites of “objectification and dehumanisation.” The ultimate result in both scenarios, still, is the violent misrecognition of the black body as negation: “to be seen in a racist way is an ironic way of not being seen through being seen. It is to be seen with overdetermined anonymity, which amounts, in effect, to invisibility” (*Fanon and the Crisis* 58). This is Makak’s fate proper, he is captured – both literally (placed in jail/lives on Monkey Mountain) and figuratively (by colonial legalese and its dehumanising registers) – and where he finally announces to the jury in court that: “Sirs, I am sixty years old. I have live all my life like a wild beast in hiding” (*Dream* 226) – what should be noted is not only the zoological language that is confirmatory of a colonial racism and corporeal reductionism of the black body, but also the attendant pairing of his hypervisibility – whether performative or not remains secondary at this juncture – with his dehumanisation, his invisibility proper. Even so, his “hiding” (or more faithfully, his “being hidden”), because it lends itself to the mask – to mimicry and its double capacity for an imaginative redoing of the relationship between self and other, of colonial subjectivity and Caribbean subalternity – also allows for the possible theorisation of Black identity both for and against this nothingness. In other words, if Makak is a “mimic man,” according to a Naipaulean parlance, he is also – in

spite and because of his mimicry – the man most best situated for both the disarticulation of colonial racism and the corresponding rearticulation of a Black Caribbean subjectivity.²⁹

How Glissant enters this conversation is slightly different, both philosophically and methodologically.³⁰ Whereas, as I have been arguing throughout, Walcott's politics are defined by their appropriative relation to colonial history, mainly erecting their countercolonial poetics by way of repopulating this colonial register through a recasting of its "double ambivalence" (*In the Break* 1), Glissant wants to question the very logical legitimacy of this lexicon. Put differently, while Walcott's work retains (but does not confirm) the validity of "the Old World" – even if through a fundamental conceptual usurpation of its main premises – Glissant recognises in the Old World's thinking a linguistic and cultural incompleteness which, if it were to be fully explored, would finally show the need to design a new language with which to accommodate the Caribbean person's divergent and convergent histories, futures, poetics and politics. It is, first, this particular observation, though mostly as a charge against the former, that Kamau Braithwaite makes in relation to Walcott's writing. According to Braithwaite, Walcott's poetry suffers primarily because of its reliance on this Western tradition; it is this ambivalence, to Braithwaite, which if engaged – as does Walcott – also works against the expression of a uniquely Caribbean poetics. For example, Walcott, writing in *Adious, Carenage* in "The Schooner *Flight*," pronounces himself thus:

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
And either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation. (*Selected Poems* 114)

Walcott is here, through the use of the "compound" figure of Shabine, writing of his culturally, racially, and historically mixed heritage, yet more than this, he is suggesting that

²⁹ It is in the eponymous novel (*The Mimic Men* (1967)) that the idea of "mimic men" is first found in Caribbean letters. There, as in *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul concerns himself with the dismissal of both the ontological and historical value of the Caribbean subject. This conclusion, as is my contention herein, is as incorrect as it is confessional of a problematic conceptual lineage that continues to miscategorise the creative and cultural significance of much Caribbean writing.

³⁰ These differences may be due to their respective historical influences; one Anglo-phone and the other Franco-phone. For these reasons, then, it is important to start approaching the Caribbean not only through its transnational register, but – as Brent Hayes Edwards (*The Practice of Diaspora* (2009)) and others have started doing – through the politics of translation that always attends this transnational poetics.

neither is this avoidable nor abominable as a fact.³¹ As Jahan Ramazani tells us in *A Transnational Poetics*, Walcott's poem (poetry) is concerned with the inescapability of colonial histories and their legacies on the Caribbean subject, as it is with the influence of this Western tradition on Caribbean poetics: "[i]f a 'nation,' he [Walcott] is so as an *irreducibly* plural aggregate of many nationalities" (*A Transnational Poetics* 1, [italics mine]). What should not escape us, still, is how this (rightly) transnational poetic voice – if you like, this vocal "plural aggregate" – is accompanied by an ontological and historical alienation which, as Walcott makes clear in his former conception of an amnesiac imaginativeness, also resituates him as both legitimate subject and poet, as he tell us in 'Shabine Leaves the Republic:' "I had no nation now but the imagination./After the white man, the niggers didn't want me/when the power swing to their side" (*Selected Poems* 115). It is this imagination which, in the same poem, Walcott appeals to in the search for both his Caribbean identity and poetic voice – his history, that is, he can only *re-member* (can only appreciate this amnesiac advantage, that is) by way of adapting the "words" that it originally grants him:

I met History once, but he ain't recognize me,
 a parchment Creole, with warts
 like an old sea-bottle, crawling like a crab
 through the holes of shadow cast by the net
 of a grille balcony; cream linen, cream hat.
 I confront him and shout, 'Sir, is Shabine!
 They say I'se your grandson. You remember Grandma,
 your black cook, at all?' The bitch hawk and spat.
 A spat like that worth any number of words.
But that's all them bastards have left us: words. (*Selected Poems* 115, [italics mine])

"Words," also to be conceived rightly as the final materialisation of a Caribbean plural (transnational) poetics, become possible – according to this Walcottian arithmetic – only through an encounter with this brutal historical rejection ("But that's all them bastards have left us: words"). In other words, if the theorisation of an imaginative amnesia by Walcott

³¹ Walcott's is of racial and cultural mix. This, then, may explain his preference for Shabine – and not, for instance, Caliban – as the spokesperson for this poetics. Still, whether through Shabine or Caliban (or even Makak), this poetics is concerned with the reimagination of a Caribbean history and its politics. This is what matters most to me.

remains somewhat immaterial – or, as Brathwaite would have it, naively indebted to a Western episteme that precludes a Caribbean poetic sensibility – this is eschewed by Walcott’s eventual substitution of *word* (a more materially valid element) in pursuit of this “History” that both rejects and forgets the Caribbean nigger subject (“I met History once, but he ain’t recognize me”). Walcott, finally moves his writing towards a sceptical critique of the Afro-Caribbean tendency to valorise imagined origins and historical certitudes, he asks: “... Who knows/who his grandfather is, much less his name?” It is, yet, not the absence of grandfathers (or history) that is worshipped by Walcott, but the need – after the slave trade and its subsequent amnesia – to imagine anew, proper, to rehistoricise the very meaning of “grandfatherhood” in relation to the Caribbean person’s identity, precisely by recognising the value of the initially imposed, then adopted (and finally adapted) word of the Old World.

If Ramazani’s claim that “[t]he astonishing hybridity” of Walcott’s poetry “contravenes the widespread assumptions that postcolonial literature develops by sloughing off Eurocentrism for indigeneity” (*The Hybrid Muse* 50) appears dangerously too sweeping a statement to be made, then Glissant’s more careful expression of a comparable point should prove more useful: “[a]gainst the monolingual imperialism inherited from the West, we propose to get rid of the equation: ‘One people, one language’” (*Caribbean Discourse* 150). Expressed in both Ramazani’s and Glissant’s points, nevertheless, is the importance of recognising that singular narratives of Caribbean history – those which, like Froude’s earlier, either privilege the Western prototype or, like Brathwaite, emphasise the folkloric – cannot truly account for the cultural diversity and heterogeneity of the Caribbean space without also potentially vulgarising the latter’s verity. More to the point, as Glissant continues: “[w]e [the Caribbean people] have not lived a ‘continuous’ history, a transition from the oral to the written, through accretions and transformations. We are faced with an impossible task” (*Caribbean Discourse* 151). This “impossible task,” Glissant wants us to believe, is with the narrating of a Caribbean history which, while striving for a recognition of the political and cultural specificities of this region, also avoids the trap of a monolingual and nationalist poetics. Even simpler, the multiplicity of Caribbean history – of necessity – requires a more heterogeneous (i.e., transnational as it is Pan-Caribbean) register in its calculation.³² However, the exact opposite is Brathwaite’s aspiration, as Patricia Ismond puts it, Brathwaite object is “to set in vibration an awareness that is predominantly black; to liberate a way of thinking and feeling that is essentially new in so far

³² Again, see Victoria Collis-Buthelezi (2015) for a discussion of this “Pan-Caribbean” transnational poetics.

as it is devoid of all the strains and elements of the Western myth” (Ismond 57). In fact, this is how Brathwaite poeticises his own positions in *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (1973), writing in “Negus” (found in Islands), he warns that,

It is not enough to be free
of the whips, principalities and powers
where is your Kingdom of the Word? (*The Arrivants*)

While the caveat against the sort of theoretical complacency that wants to take the physical (corporeal) freedom of the Caribbean subject for granted (“It is not enough to be free/of whips, principalities and powers”) is admirable and relevant, Brathwaite’s later suggestion of the requirement to discover a uniquely Caribbean poetics appears the more tricky, especially in light of Glissant’s rejection of any monolingual “equation” of this space. That is, if Brathwaite – very similar to Aimé Césaire’s poetics of *negritude* – sees as resolution to this “impossible task” the construction of a new language (essentially defined as a separate “Kingdom of the [Black] Word”), Glissant – and definitely Walcott (albeit differently from each other) – advocate rather for an interrogation of the *relationality* between this Black word (and *world*) and its colonial influences.³³

Obviously, it is not my recommendation that Glissant offers a solution to this Brathwaite-Walcott debate, rather, as I am interested in showing, it is his advantage that – in conceiving of the Caribbean through a “poetics of relation” – he also allows this space (its ambivalences and multiplicities) to be theorised outside of this apparent Brathwaite-Walcott divide. If, as Ismond intimates in her treatment of this divide, Walcott is a “private poet” (concerned with the “personal salvation” of both Caribbean poet and subject) and Brathwaite a “public” one (concerned with the “collective destiny” of the Caribbean people), I then argue that Glissant is a hybrid of the two, who further – due to this very hybridity – also manages to re-create a new language for the expression of both Caribbean histories and their poetics. My goal, yet, is not merely to suggest that the divide can only be reconciled by way of creating this pairing of the

³³ It should be noted that as I here pair Brathwaite’s thinking with the poetics of *negritude*, it is also with a full recognition of their differences. I do not by any means suggest that Brathwaite behaves like either Senghor or Césaire (although a case for this may be made). Rather, my contention is that their respective pursuits of a black folklorist poetics appears possible mainly at the rejection of the entirety of Western influence. This, as Glissant and Walcott (and Gikandi) make clear, although a natural inclination for Caribbean poetics, is nonetheless a hard position to defend.

two schools of thought – neither is this the truth, nor is it the most reliable approach to the question – rather, I contend that Glissant’s thinking works in a way that seeks to helpfully oscillate between these polarities, while allowing for both their individual significances. In other words, Glissant not so much settles this matter as he constructs his own poetics by way of relating his own thinking to both these positions. This new poetics, furthermore, is the subaltern’s language proper – defined by its ability to (dis-)engage colonial registers as it is by its own codes of re-historicity, its cross-cultural consciousness with which is meaningfully rechartered the entirety of Caribbean history:

The implosion of Caribbean history (of the converging histories of our people) relieves us of the linear, hierarchical vision of a single History that would run its unique course. It is not this History that has roared around the edge of the Caribbean, but actually a question of the subterranean convergence of our histories. The depths are not only the abyss of neurosis but primarily the site of multiple converging paths. (*Caribbean Discourse* 66)

A rehistoricisation of the Caribbean, according to Glissant, is thus marked by a twofold ambition: (1) its capacity to recognise – by way of an exhumation – these many histories and their relatedness, and (2) through this Foucauldian poetics of “archaeology,” to avoid the travesty of hierarchies and stratifications according to which is first established these monolingual politics of the Caribbean.³⁴ In *Poetics of Relation* Glissant puts the matter more eloquently: “I understand your difference, or in other words, *without creating a hierarchy*, I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh. But perhaps we need to bring an end to the very notion of a [hierarchical] scale. Displace all reduction” (*Poetics of Relation* 190, [italics mine]). It is this, the annihilation of “all reduction” or, as he otherwise prefers the same point, the irreducibility of the Caribbean’s difference, that lies at the heart of Glissant’s poetics of history: “Emerging from the choleric depths of entanglement, here is/my leap into hesitation” (CP, ‘Savage Reading’ 8). The Caribbean subject emerges from these “depths of entanglement” – from this historical relationality – into his opaque difference (his

³⁴ I want to primarily see Glissant’s work as informed by Michele Foucault’s idea of an “archaeological” hermeneutics; as both writers, although in noticeably different ways, appear concerned with the ‘exhumation’ of new conceptualities against established structures of society and modernist history. Yet, if Foucault’s is with sociality and its historiographical patterns (for example, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), then Glissant’s is with the history and the ontology of Blackness.

“hesitation”), according to which is also denied the erection of any hierarchical ordering (othering) of his being.

Indeed, the above seems to anticipate other of Glissant’s related tropes – opacity and *detour* – both of which he designs to secure the ontological specificity of his Caribbean subjects as the political particularity of his/its poetics. Opacity, as already discussed above, is both a right and a strategy with which to guarantee the ontological irreducibility of the Caribbean subject – it is through this rejection of an external understanding that this subject also protects its autonomy as expressed by its different humanity:

Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. There would be something great and noble about initiating such a movement, referring not to Humanity but to the exultant divergence of humanities. (*Poetics of Relation* 190)

Glissant, by pairing opacity with this irreducible difference, marks the emerging Caribbean self as not only without the hierarchical politics of the human, but as – in and by itself – an exemplary instantiation of an alternative (possibly revolutionary) humanity (“referring not to humanity but to the exultant divergence of humanities”). Still, because these “opacities can coexist and converge,” the point is not to reject any one of these in favour of the other – as Brathwaite worries might be the case with the Walcottian practice – but, by recognising the irreducibility of each opacity, to finally appreciate (without necessarily deifying this) that “[t]here has to be dialogue with the West” (*Poetics of Relation* 191). To be sure, yet, Glissant is neither constructing this *dialogism* through a centralisation of the West – his ideology is fundamentally averse to any such hierarchies – nor is he content with the Brathwaitian call for a strictly folklorist poetics. Rather, as he finally states in his theorisation of opacity as a form poetic resistance tool, “the opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. Opacity is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence” (*Poetics of Relation* 191). Envisioned by Glissant, then, is not merely the protection of this opacity and its functional irreducibility, but more

importantly, the deployment of it as a source not only of historical autonomy but of ontological relevance too: opacity, it must be crucially added, is not an end in itself (not a naïve celebration of one's impenetrability) but a means towards which a dialogical – relational proper – poetics both emerges and, subsequently, intelligently lends itself to a more faithful rehistoricisation of the Caribbean as a key interlocutor in modernist discourse.

Glissant's poetry is, indeed, a historicising and historical one – that is, it is concerned with the question of a Caribbean poetics as it is with the theorisation of the relation between this poetics and slavery (and colonialism). As such, his poetics speak primarily, if such an act can indeed be actualised, for the subaltern subject as much as for the Caribbean poet; for that site of difference defined by its opacity as by its irreducible individuality, and as for a poetics of this particular difference. To dramatise this, for instance, Glissant – in one of his poems' six cantos entitled 'Rock' – uses the rock element (itself the surest embodiment of this opacity) to personify this subaltern's attempt at "participation and confluence." If the poem instances what Dash rightly sees as Glissant's "attempts to distance [himself] from the false opacity of ideological folklorism or the romanticising of cultural essence and authenticity" (*Édouard Glissant* 127), it also – perhaps due to this initial awareness – acts as primary incubation for the new language of this subaltern personality. Here, in other words, the Gramscian concept of an overlapping temporality (with its generative potentiality) is coupled with this fact of opacity to express the historical ambiguities of this Caribbean subject. The first part of the poem beautifully introduces this subject's desire for its opacity (its "purity"), through which is also guaranteed its ontological and historical individuality:

Sea-foam, rain, head accosted by torrents of rainwater

O delivery of my faces luminous interlacing

knotted intersection of two rivers storm's auguries

I roll like a callus beneath the waves, the foam, I bathe

I a rock and the sea a rock, my bays are quiet, the
sea floods my presence

sea-foam, the landscape turns a convergence begins to germinate

the line of horizon goes back to the primordial place of my joy

trees dedicate the dry flight of their leaves to me

mud from ravines pours its

patient rumination toward my purity like a quay
quietly rots, silty tranquilities (CP, 'Rock' 9)

Being a rock, the very symbol (facticity even) of opacity, this subject recognises – because of its relation with the “sea” – that it first emerges from this site of “knotted intersection of two rivers,” then develops into a heterogeneous reality, where also the “convergence begins to germinate.” What Glissant wants us to take away here is, less the individual facts of the Caribbean subject’s historical multiplicity or even its procreant entanglement, as the relation – even poetics of relation – that subsist between this subject and the sea, and more broadly, as I argue very shortly, with its general landscape(s). This “luminous interlacing,” which becomes a “knotted intersection” before being a total “convergence,” is understood principally as the result of that historical relationship the Black Caribbean subject (the slave) has with the (Atlantic) sea. As Dash summarises the case: “the wisdom of the ocean, a repository of patient understanding, memory and the ambiguities of history. The ocean waits constantly and inscrutably. It epitomises the complexities of experience. [...] In confronting its past, Martinique and the Caribbean can have only one ancestor, the sea” (*Édouard Glissant* 47). Indeed, echoing Walcott’s famous observation – “The sea is History” (*Selected Poems* 123) – Glissant, as Dash rightly notes, wants to construct the sea as that site best expressive of this subject’s historical experiential multiplicity. Still, if the sea has its multiplicities as it does its histories, so does this subject – this rock: “I a rock and the sea a rock.” In other words, the rock – and by extension, the attribute of opacity – is neither an essentially Caribbean property nor is it an exclusively aquatic thing, rather, it is coextensive with both sea and the Caribbean subject, as are the histories of these two opacities: “the/sea floods my presence.”

Before wrongly concluding that Glissant is merely involved in a sort of poetics that simplistically pairs landscape – the sea, the rock – with the Caribbean subject (its psyche), it is important to also note that his poetry is more deliberately concerned with the materiality of language. By materiality of language is meant language’s capacity to deal with human histories and politics, while also being involved in a kind of semiotic ingenuity that essentially destabilises the hierarchy of symbols and codes of signification. Landscape (the sea,) for example, is purposefully evoked in Glissant’s poetry because of its capacity to challenge the arbitrary rigidities often set between man and history – and, in turn, to emblematised the poetical and political continuities that exist between these two. This is Jeff Humphries’

summary of the point in the anthology's introduction: "[n]o image is more central in Glissant's poetic vision than that of the sea. It represents the bitter experiences of expatriation, the long forced journey into exile of the slaves, as well as the enduring insight of accumulation and the nondistinction of humanity from nature *and* history" (CP, xxi). In fact, Glissant is merely reiterating this view when he reminds us that "[b]ecause as far as suffering is concerned it belongs to all: everyone has its vigorous sand between their teeth. The ocean is patience, its wisdom is the tare of time". Or, if one would prefer a strictly poetic rendition of the point:

and the angry depth of the earth's womb raises up
its splendour around me
the rain-festooned air bears down upon me
its invisible restraints
Taoulo cries out, and next to me time lays down
its yellow scarves
and time steals invisible speed
the indolent putrescence of a wild mango on a rock. (CP, 'Rock' 9)

The "angry depths of the earth's womb," or what must rightly be taken as the island(s) spaces of the Caribbean geography, are here evoked – "raises up" – in a way that attempts to emphasise this relationality between man and his surroundings, between his history and nature. Between, if you will, these two coextensive sites of opacity. When the Caribbean subject confesses to being surrounded by "its [the island] splendour," he also is aware of how continuous he, as expression of historical opacity, remains with(in) it: "The indolent putrescence of a wild mango on a rock." The mango, as fruition of nature, is here paired with the rock to emphasise their related opacities, even if in a largely ambiguous and embattled way ("putrescence"). Furthermore, time – the wisdom of which, we are told, "is the tare of [history]" – is not only fractured, through a Gramscian incubatory pattern, but it is rendered a pedagogical instrument with which this subject comes to negotiate its temporalities; past, present, and future: "Taoulo cries out, and next to me time lays down/its yellow scarves/and time steals invisible speed." No sooner is this subject returned into a previousness with its memories and traumas ("Taoulo cries") – *Taoulo* is a river in formerly slave trading Central African Republic – then he is catapulted, because of time's tendency towards movement and dynamism, into the present and

its future projections (“and time steals invisible speed”).³⁵ Ultimately, time conspires with both history and nature towards the re-instruction (reinscription) of the Caribbean subject and its right to an indecipherably enabling opacity: “to the active production of a visible but *unreadable* image” (Britton 24).

More impressive, yet, is how Glissant manages – through his insistence on the interrelation between nature and history – to show the Caribbean subject as always involved in a sort of *becoming*. Bhabha, from whom is borrowed the trope, understands it, first as the theoretical anti-thesis of “being” – the latter roughly understood as the teleological apotheosis of human activity – and secondly, as that which negotiates both past and present in the formation of modernist discourse. The modern subject, similarly – whether Western or Caribbean – becomes so only in acknowledging (in relation to) this dialectic between these temporalities and their respective histories. It is here neither that important to critically engage the validity of this distinction, between being and becoming, nor is it strategic to emphasise it. Rather, as I herein deploy the trope – always with a confident presupposition of its heuristic efficacy – I wish to show how Glissant’s poetry, because it would insist on the opaque incalculability of the Caribbean subject, also allows for the recognition of this subject’s perennial becoming: “the dialectic in ‘rapid transience’ [“and time steals invisible speed”] as it is forming in the process of *historical becoming*” (Bhabha 190, [italics mine]).

Opacity, in other words, because it would want to finally protect the image of the Caribbean self from an oppressive *understanding*, also functions towards an expression of the former’s ontological independence, this as measured by its inherent capacity for the involvement in its own self-definition, in its self-sufficient becoming. This self-definition, more crucially, takes place not outside of modernity’s materialities – neither outside of the spectres of colonialism and slavery, nor in spite of these – but, instead, right within (in relation to) them and their violent constructions of a Caribbean otherness. Indeed, opacity (and its ontological capabilities) cannot be *ahistoricised* – it is, as is the poetics it inexorably generates, always historical and political. Glissant is only too aware of this and, as I now turn to show, in the section tellingly called “The Indies” in his anthology, concerns himself – through a thematic

³⁵ For a history of the slave trade in Central Africa, one could see Maureen Warner-Lewis’ *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures* (2003) and Mario Azevedo “Power and Slavery in Central Africa: Chad (1890–1925) (1982)”. A book I have found useful too is by Ojo, Olatunji and Nadine, Hunt: *Slavery in Africa and the Caribbean: A History of Enslavement and Identity Since the Eighteenth Century* (2012).

and narrative consideration of Caribbean history (its conquest, slavery, and anticolonial politics) – with the specific poeticisation (which is also the historicisation) of these phenomenologies of modernity. If his poetry engenders a poetics of the Caribbean, it also always does so by regenerating a specific historicity of this space: history and nature, to repeat a central point, here combine to not only challenge the assumed symmetry between these two, but – through this – to imbue poetic language with a historical materiality that favourably acts a counter-hermeneutic calculus of the Caribbean subject and its opaque becoming.

“The Indies” basically aspires towards a retelling of the history of the Caribbean through a poetic register, but ultimately with the intention of troubling this distinction between history and poetics by emphasising the materiality (historicity) of the latter. That is, if these poems – as I now turn to demonstrate – succeed in their recasting of the Caribbean story, they also achieve something more fundamental on the meta-critical level: the re-expression of the relationship between history and nature. Neither history nor nature is here privileged in the construction of this Caribbean space; rather, it is in revealing the coextensiveness of these two axes that a new (Caribbean) counter-poetics is realised. In ‘The Voyage,’ for instances, wherein is recounted the travels (and travails): “Voyage, muffled voyage, when the storms had their part, and madness” (CP, ‘The Voyage’ 75) of Columbus and his sailors to the New World, and their subsequent arrival “on the twelfth of October, 1492,” the Caribbean islands are both a thing of ambiguous mystery and historical necessity:

What are they to us, these Indies where no one knows if the grass
grows for our mouths,
For our thirst, our pleasure, in this moment already of great thirst for
wine!”
But who, seamen, can avoid the Indies? (CP, ‘The Voyage’ 76)

Columbus and his ‘seamen’ enter the Caribbean not only with a foreign language – its alien codes of cartography and logic (“What are they to us ...?”) – but, in fact due to this, with a total disregard for the autonomous indigeneity of the Indies. The Indies are here not merely overdetermined by an imposed colonial register and its ruthless historicising techniques, “And Chaos! The courted dawn of every land,” but they only appear to gain historical value the moment they are brought into contact with the West (“the gesture of saluting toward the

west!”) These islands, thus, emerge as sites of ontological significance and historical relevance because of this contact “between the one land [the islands,] and the other [the West]” – only through this dialectic, whose very nature is as unavoidable as it is Eurocentric: “But who, seamen, can avoid the Indies?” Another way of asking this, of course, is: who can avoid the West (and its violence)? Nonetheless, as Glissant’s poem continues, this relation is, strictly speaking, only one which functions to foreshadow the subsequent spectre of slavery and its economic and political relevance to Caribbean history. Glissant, to put it another way, does not merely retell this history in order to cement its legacies and triumphs over the Black subject, but – through a consideration of the atrocious economies of the slave trade that accompany it – endeavours also to disturb this narrative of modernity as to help reveal both its inhumanity and the indispensable role played by those it would have strived to silence into a state of ontological negation; like “the silent one[s] who belonged to the sand of absence” (CP, ‘The Voyage’ 78):

They have met the land, and step back into their history to consider it!
 They assemble on this beach, the virgin beach where is no mooring.
 They will start a market: of men and of gods – but the language
 ripens within them! –
 Of spices, gold, and yellow fever! (CP, ‘The Voyage’ 79)

The seamen’s reluctance to develop a new language with which to encounter the Caribbean “land” points towards a Eurocentric arrogance (and ignorance) as it does to the limitations of this taxonomy and its tabulation of modernity. When the seaman meet the land, for example, they automatically “step back into their history to consider it;” the newness of the Caribbean land (“virgin beach”) – its opacity proper – instead of being appreciated for its uniqueness, is instantly violated by a foreign conceptuality whose achievement can only be the confession of a Western ideological fallacy as the futile recognition of a Caribbean irreducibility. Similarly, the slave trade – “They will start a market: of men and of gods” – emerges as something that cannot be overlooked in any faithful account of modernity and its politics of human activity. That is, if the “market” here more ostensibly denotes the violent (and illegal) trade of Black human bodies for financial ends – thereby showing the disposability of these bodies when placed within a Western humanism – it also refers to the larger inseparability between present

day capitalist practice and this history. Slavery (like colonialism) is as central to modern day patterns of economic enterprise, as it is to the very foundation of a broader claim to European industrialisation.³⁶ As Gikandi has perspicuously remarked: “[c]olonised people and imperial spaces were crucial ingredients in the generation and consolidation of a European identity and its master narratives” (*Maps of Englishness* 5).

Likewise, Paul Gilroy’s ruminations in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1995) should here function as a very serious poeticisation of the slave trade and its legacies on black cultural practice. He usefully reads the slave ship as “‘the living means’ for articulating the new modes of political dissent and cultural production” that Glissant’s poetry must, I want to add, be seen as invariably involved. His reasoning is justified thus:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise [his study] and as my starting point. The image of the ship – a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion – is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons [...]. Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activities as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: (Gilroy 4)

The ship here, Gilroy wants to say, acts as that first coordinate around which the Black body – originally African, and finally Caribbean (then Diasporic) – first comes to notice its corporeal otherness, its epidermal non-significance and, subsequent to this, attempts to design a countercultural practice (i.e., a set of poetics and politics) with which to resituate itself against this ontological and historical erasure. Accordingly, the ship is finally that microcosmic expression of an embattled entanglement, a violent relationality between the West and Africa, that – if it would place the Black body in contact with other portals of modernist history, does so only (to remain with this *Glissantian* phraseology) through a violation of its opacity. In other words, like Gikandi above, Gilroy, by locating his criticism at this juncture of the actual (transactional) shipment of Black bodies from Africa to the Caribbean, also seeks to highlight the role of movement – the figure of the ship always presupposes movement, thus, also

³⁶ This is indeed the central thesis to Eric Willaims’ *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944). Its themes would later be picked up by Gikandi in *Maps of Englishness* and *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*. Similarly, my own thinking should be read in line with this critical tradition. Yet, where I want to differ from this earlier work is in my specific concern with the impact this thesis has on the practice of historiography.

presupposes the sea – in both the subjugation (commodification and subsequent racial fetishism) of these bodies and the resultant counter poetics to a historicity that seeks to deny them validity. If the (Atlantic) sea is responsible for the destruction of this Black body, it – only now as the “Black Atlantic” – can also be employed towards the creation of a decidedly Black cultural hermeneutics. Additionally, fittingly appropriating the *Deleuzean* trope of the “rhizome,” Gilroy speaks of “the rhizomorphic, fractural structure of the transcultural, international formation” (Gilroy 4) which, in being accountable for the gruesome dispersal of the African population, is also adaptable for the imagination of a new political language with which to counter this silencing history.

This is so because, as Gilroy continues, “as it were, getting on board promises a means to reconceptualise the orthodox relationship between modernity and what passes for its prehistory. It provides a different sense of where modernity might itself be thought to begin in the constitutive relationship with outsiders” (Gilroy 17). In fact, this is how Glissant sometimes chooses to enter this dialogue; by tracing the continuities between Africa and the Caribbean as communicated by the ship trope – by the movement across the sea of both the Black bodies and their (lost) heritages and practices. In one of his poem’s cantos meaningfully entitled ‘The Trade,’ for instance, he offers a fitting description of this exchange and its legacies on the black body when he there writes: “You [the slave traders] passed over their desires, without them seeing you: they with whom the enormous Indies of misfortune would be populated” (CP, ‘The Trade’ 87). Visibly charting a historical continuity between Africa and the Caribbean, Glissant not only recognises the consequential diasporic cultural connections that emerge between these two spaces, but – more interestingly – creatively locates the conception of modernity, not after the slave trade, but right before and at its initial enactment on the shores of Africa. Africa becomes here, unlike in the Hegelian scheme of things, a zone of historical import in relation to modernist history. The reason for this, Glissant contends, is due to the fact that these Black bodies are originally (in Africa, and before their criminal shipment) with “their [own] desires” and that, it is therefore, not their subsequent “misfortune” (the slave trade) that (*un*)defines them as (*un*)-modern subject, but this very early opacity which does: “Men of night, these were suns of black blood” (CP, ‘The Trade’ 87). There is another way, less roundabout, of saying this: the Black body is not born a slave, but only becomes so as a result of an illegal transatlantic bartering of his race (and body). It is this similar awareness that is at the heart of

the Caribbean scholar, Maureen Warner-Lewis' stupendous discussion of this history in her book, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures* (2003):

Indeed, it is again by interrogating the slave's personality beyond and before the opprobrium of the slave ship that one comes to realize that slavery, whether African domestic or transatlantic, was a state or condition which a person acquired because of circumstance; it was not an inherent construct of the person's identity. When analysis of Caribbean life, history and culture begin on the plantation, this dimension of personhood and identity prior to enslavement is lost, and one is left to grapple with notions of deficiency and pathology. (Warner-Lewis xxv)

Whereas Naipaul would choose to focus on a nothingness and these "notions of deficiency and pathology" in his poeticisation of Caribbean history, Warner-Lewis rejects this as the result of a conceptually lethargic engagement with this history and – like Wilson Harris, Walcott, Glissant et al., and their appreciation of the centrality of imagination to Caribbean poetics – is also aware of this pathology's historical contingency. The Black man is not essentially a slave, just as the colonialist is not essentially a master; rather, this binary (or this Hegelian dialectic) – first established under a dubious Western episteme, as is the case – later comes to erroneously thematise these two subjects' images in a way that permanently disfavours that of the Black body: "Do not trust the one whose Poem is debased and whose Word turns hard" (CP, 'The Trade' 88). The wise warning is as simple as it is practical: always meet the conqueror's narrative of modernity (his "Poem") with a degree of scepticism (even complete rejection) that should prepare one for a recognition of the truth that, while the Western master "builds cities around the globe," he also has "[black women] at [his] feet crying for mercy" and "[t]he lingering cry of children hurled into the sea" (CP, 'Carthage' 108-9). Western civilisation is not blameless. Warner-Lewis, similarly, in recommending that we commence our accounts of modernity not after the slave trade – i.e., not at the plantation centre and its politics – reminds us of the importance of all that which happens before and during the conversion of Black people from African subjects to slaves, from sites of ontological validity to expressions of a pathological nothingness. She prepares us, indeed, with the capacity to appreciate the African shore and the ship as vital tropes of modernist discourse as are the plantation spaces and the

metropole centres.³⁷ Only with this knowledge can we, as scholars involved in the study of Black history and its literary practice, begin to redefine modernity in ways that fruitfully undermine its main assumptions, through which it would also want to perpetuate a violently anti-Black agenda against the Caribbean subject.

Sure, the Black body's identity cannot be essentialised into that of a slave, just as Western socio-economic achievements (capitalism and its respective institutional permutations) should not be understood outside of this subject's contributions. This is both Gilroy's and Warner-Lewis' crucial counsel: before being a slave, the Black body is a person – a collection of an intelligent consciousness and an ontologically legitimate physicality and spirituality – and, it is only the ship which first announces his untenable conversion into nothingness, further wanting to relegate him to the West's unconscious by way of denying his role in the construction of modernity. While not exactly a call for a return to an African past, not a prelapsarian rhetoric of an Edenic Africa of the Césairean/Brathwaitian kind, these statements emphasise the importance of locating the Black (diasporic) subject not only within the pathology of slavery and the plantation systems – but also in relation to its own pre-slavery past. Similarly, this is not at all to suggest that slavery and colonialism be entirely forgotten in Black literary and cultural criticism; rather that, it is incomplete to think of the Black body only in these terms and – in the case of Naipaul – equally unjust to then conclude, because of this fixation on slavery and the slave, that the Caribbean people are a race defined by a nothingness. Neither is this move helpful nor is it optimal; rather, as Walcott says of Naipaul's attitude, “[t]o write about this lack as if it were the fault of the African and the Indian is unfair. Naipaul is unfair. He is unjust. And he is unfair and unjust at an obscene cost, at the cost of those who do not have his eloquence, his style” (“The Garden Path” 129). This is the unfairness that is avoided by Glissant in his poetry. Instead, the latter wants to speak for the “sons of those who survived” the slave trade with “such language, language that does not err” and – as he would have it in the penultimate canto of “The Indies” (“The Heroes”) – with a poetics that blends both history and nature to tell of the resilience of these Black slaves. Glissant's poetics, to be sure, speaks for the Caribbean subject as for its ontological and historical irreplaceability within modernity:

³⁷ Once again, this is Collis-Buthelezi's (2015) main thesis in her reading of Walrond's anthology in light of the historical and political connections between the Caribbean and the Cape. Again, one may here see Collis-Buthelezi, Victoria J. “Caribbean Regionalism, South Africa, and Mapping New World Studies.” *Small Axe* 19.1 46 (2015): 37-54.

Toussaint, already named, who was a centaur, came to die on the
frozen sand of the Empire.

In truth, your most difficult son; for him you veiled your face and
spent your tears.

He knew you, then went away, at peace; you shall mourn upon the
forest of cuscus the blood of your eldest son.

For he was on the ocean, against the grain of beginning
On his way to know the country of conquerors, from whence would
rise the black fray of their crimes

(Now we can say that he was both sage and victim),
And History closed, upon this betrayed warrior, the unmindful curtain
of a winter.

Let him die, oh let him die, and let the forest grow. (CP, 'The Heroes' 94)

This “language that does not err” is, also, language that does not lie – does not distort, does not, finally, do violence against Black ontology and its history. Glissant’s objective, if one prefers, may be seen as a response to Spivak’s question, “can the subaltern speak?” or – as Michele Barrett’s reading of another of Spivak’s work, *A Critique of Post-colonial Critique: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999) suggests – the equally relevant question: “can the hegemonic ear hear anything?” Raised by both questions, and countered by Glissant’s poetics, is the presence of an epistemic violence that each time accompanies Western narratives of modernity. Can Toussaint, Caribbean’s “most difficult son,” be heard by the “frozen sand of the Empire?” While Spivak finally goes on to respond in the negative – “the subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak 104) – Glissant contends that not only is speech possible for this subject, but that through its speaking it also comes to retell its history; comes, in fact, to construct a new language that does not err.³⁸

Furthermore, this language, instead of erasing the traumas of slavery and colonialism from its memory – from its semiotic repository – actually acknowledges these and, by repopulating them with a different conceptuality, turns them into a counter-hermeneutic instrument:

³⁸ Spivak, of course, means more than just that this subject cannot speak. She wants to say that, given the established political and historical lexicon, this act of speech becomes impossible for the subaltern. Hers, then, is not a rejection of the possibilities of speech – not a nihilist damnation of the subaltern’s potential expressivity – but rather, it is a critique of the linguistic range available for this expression. See, for example, *A Critique of Post-colonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999).

“counterpoetics sometimes succeeds in turning lack itself into a means of opposing the dominant language” (Britton 32). Similarly, Glissant constructs his “betrayed warrior’s” counterpoetics in a way that turns its death, the death of Toussaint, into a critical advantage: “Let him die, oh let him die, and let the forest grow.” Death here marks not the end of the Black body, but rather, its continual survival through the new language (the growing forest,) which is made possible by this earlier death. Man and nature are joined together, then to history, to finally delineate a counter-cultural poetics of the Caribbean. And where this subaltern is closed off by (from) History – denied by a Columbian-Hegelian-Froudean narrative – he emerges again through a creation of this new language: “What do they need from this voice I have made my own, from the/snow of this poem?” (CP, ‘The Heroes’ 95). Colonial language – French in the case of Glissant, and English in that of Walcott – is here adopted and adapted or, in different language, abrogated and appropriated, to construct a counterpoetics (“the snow of this poem”) that has as its final mission the full and faithful expression of the Caribbean subject’s ontological and historical legitimacy.³⁹ Toussaint, then, if a revolutionary on the political level, also is so on the poetic one; in fact, his poetics here comes to primarily function as the extension proper of his politics. The task, to put the matter a bit differently, is not merely to free the Black subject from colonial domination, but also to achieve this – after converting this apparent lack into something – by freeing his linguistic potentialities and their reimaginative elements. As one of Glissant’s characters (Mathieu) in his novel, *La Lezarde* puts it: “So, we haven’t done much. But there it is. You could say that we can speak now” (Glissant 215).

Indeed, as has been the central theme of this chapter, the distinction between historicity and poetics is, in the Caribbean context, as misleading as that between the poet and the critic. To bifurcate this affiliation in this way is to risk the tragedy of never truly appreciating the useful continuities between poetics and history; to risk, more elaborately, the misrecognition that, in the Caribbean, poetics can be deployed in a way that allows for the imperative rehistoricisation of modernity. Both Glissant and Walcott, although from different angles, confront this dichotomy in ways that fundamentally unsettles its assumptions about what constitutes the

³⁹ I have in mind the now standard discussions of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial literature* (1989). For a fuller explanation of these terms – “abrogation” and “appropriation” – one may consult this text.

relationship between history and poetics or, if we are to be more serious, about the very legality of this dichotomy itself. It is perhaps useful at this point to consider Scott's pertinent wonderings, in "The Theory of Haiti: *The Black Jacobins* and the Poetics of Universal History (2014)," on whether,

what we call universal history might not be worth describing, in part at least, as a *narrative* with a distinctive *aesthetic* effect, the outcome of literary devices or a mode of employment being *set to work* in order to tell a story of a certain kind, namely, a story embodying a longing for overcoming and a horizon of expectation, and the rhythm and direction of a persistent if uneven movement carrying the overall purpose toward realization. In other words, I want to suggest that, whatever else it is, universal history is also a romantic *art* that can be read for the poetics of its narrative drama. (Scott 41)

While Scott, in the same article, goes on to understand *The Black Jacobins* as a story interested – through its chronicling of “the self-emancipation of the slave” – in the initiating of “universal emancipation and therefore [of] universal history” (Scott 48), I have here been more involved with his original thesis that this theoretical goal (or others like it) can only come from a recognition of the nuanced relationship between “universal history” and aesthetics (poetics).⁴⁰ Seeing universal history as not only a “romantic *art*,” but as one which necessarily produces its own poetics, aids both in the realisation of the contingent nature of this “narrative drama” as it does in the erection, after a rearticulation of the relation between history and art, of a Caribbean counterpoetics. Scott's intervention, in other words, is as conceptually consequential and as it is an outline of a different historiographical praxis; it is concerned with the philosophical interrogation of universal history and its corollaries as it is with the development (and deployment) of a new hermeneutics with which to renegotiate this slipperiness between history and poetics. In the same way, Walcott – who recognises the dramatic form of universal history in his composition of his play, *Dream* – further displays an awareness of this historical provisionality when he centres amnesia (its imaginative distinction, at least) in the treatment of Caribbean history. As I have shown, his poetics – in both *Dream* and “The Schooner *Flight*” – mark that attempt by a Caribbean consciousness to construct its

⁴⁰ My objective here is less with an analysis of Scott's arguments than it is with an applied consideration of his claim for the theoretical continuities between a universal history and narrativity (aesthetics). This, albeit through the language of historicity and poetics, has similarly been my main thesis in this chapter.

own taxonomies with which it could argue both for its ontological worth and historical relevance. Art becomes historicity, become counterpoetics – as he beautifully puts it in his essay “What the Twilight Says”: “The future of the West Indian militancy lies in art” (“Twilight”). Militarised and dramatised, as Walcott moves to do, universal history is both challengeable and reconceivable – in fact, the poetic space becomes itself a military instrument because of its refusal to remain divorced from the act of historicising.

Walcott, further, responds to the charge of his work being too indebted to the Western canon by charging this critic (like Naipaul) with a conceptual limitation that makes it impossible for it to see the advantages of what appears to be a Caribbean nothingness. Either through the tropes of amnesia and mimicry, as mainly found in “Mimicry and Culture,” or by exploring the role of imagination (and sometimes “myth”), by way of “What the Twilight Says,” Walcott manages to establish a counterpoetics that ultimately frees the historical capacities of the Caribbean subject as it does his construction of a healthily coextensive relation between Caribbean poetics and modernist history. Where there are ideological and thematic ambiguities in his work, Walcott finally assures us, this is as inevitable as it is something to be cherished and exploited in a Caribbean poetics informed by “the colonial experience,” as by a Black phenomenology: “It [the colonial experience] was cruel but it created our literature.” Not really a rejection of the historical past’s relation to a Caribbean present (and *future*), this statement rather emphasises the recklessness in the act of ignoring history while simultaneously attempting to institute a (Caribbean) counterpoetics to this modernity:

Next we pass slave ships. Flags of all nations,
our fathers below deck too deep, I suppose,
to hear us shouting. *So we stop shouting.* (Selected Poems, ‘Shabine Encounters the Middle Passage’
117, [italics mine])

The “slave ships” and their heinous legacies must not only be noted, as Walcott et al. rightly propose, but their temporal implications – both before, during, and after the slave trade – should always be revisited in our imagination of this Caribbean counterpoetics. Likewise, neither obsession with the purely historical, nor its futurist avoidance will be helpful for this purpose. Rather, in continuing in this fashion – with this politics of historical erasure – we risk not being heard, risk remaining being unable to reach “our fathers below deck.” Without these

irreplaceable interlocutors, further, or aspirations toward a *re*-historicity remain merely sadly misinformed. It is not, in other words, this “shouting” which should inform our “strategies of language and resistance,” but, as Glissant and Walcott successfully demonstrate, the careful development of a new hermeneutic language, treasured for its conceptual newness as for its practical applicability: “So we stop shouting.” To stop shouting, yet, is not to cease being, not to suppress the potentialities of a “Black logos” – not at all (Wright 68)! Rather, it is to move away from an injudicious loudness – around which anti-Black racism seems to continue its violence on the Black body – into a more discreet counterpoetics. This is exactly what is recognised in Glissant’s trope of opacity and, accordingly, by his general poetics: to paraphrase Britton, that the Caribbean subject’s right to opacity, which is also “more fundamental than [its] right to difference,” means the “right not to be understood” (Britton 19). For the Black body to be understood by a Western episteme, also means for it not to be understood; means, finally, for it to be constantly violated by a conceptual measurement that would seek only to deny its ontological and historical presence: “understanding appears as an act of aggression because it constructs the Other as an *object* of knowledge” (Britton 19 [*italics original*]).

Therefore, as my reading of “The Indies” and Glissant’s other poems would have shown, for the subaltern to speak, for there to be the reality of a Black logos, she will need to value her opacity – to allow this “gesture of enclosure” to protect her from a violently foreign register. To be sure, still, this is not that naïve valorisation of a solipsistic Caribbean impregnability, rather, it is the appreciation of the need to develop a language that, without necessarily shouting, manages to construct (and consult) the Caribbean and its subjects as meaningful participants in the historical narrative of modernity. In this way, the Caribbean scholar, like Glissant, emerges as neither poet nor critic in the strictest senses of these appellations – but, more sophisticatedly, as a hybrid form comprised of both the poetic and the historical. His language (his poetics proper), accordingly, comes to mimic this creative admixture; in fact, as the transnationalist literary historian Jürgen Pieters reminds us, it becomes an “archaeological” and “genealogical” tool with which to uncover the past experiences of his fathers.⁴¹ Acknowledging

⁴¹ Connecting Glissant with Foucault is of course not an entirely strange move; both writers concern themselves – for want of a better expression – with a materialist analysis of historical forces on the “colonised’s ontological and social conditions. In fact, this is what Robbie Shilliam is aware of in his article “Decolonising the Ground for Ethical Enquiry: A Dialogue between Kant, Foucault, and Glissant (2001)”. For a fuller discussion of this connection, one may see that article. I present it here merely as an example of the interdisciplinary and inter-historical work that informs my own present discussion.

Michel Foucault's influence, Pieters continues to describe this type of work, what he calls narrativist historicist analysis, thus:

Narrativist historicism is a historical practice which operates in search of the principle of the historical idea, yet which, in doing so, displaces this principle from the ontological level of the past itself (where traditional historicism located it) to the discourse of the historical text (both that of practicing historians and that of the textual sources on which they operate). [...]. The prime example of this model is the historical, "archaeological," and "genealogical" work done by Foucault and by those whom he has inspired deeply. (Pieters 106 [italics original])

Archaeology and genealogy are, indeed, at the heart of Glissant's poetics of the Caribbean. His, as *Caribbean Discourse* aids reveal, is principally concerned with an endorsement of a relational pluralism that, if it would principally undermine any claims towards a Eurocentric supremacy, also argues for the specialness of a Caribbean historical autonomy (*autopsy* even). Glissant achieves this, yet, not by isolating this cross-cultural heterogeneity as by arguing that, because of it, the Caribbean subject remains irreducibly complex and, therefore, immune from the violence of a monolingual (colonial) understanding of his ontology. It is in this way that Glissant succeeds in displacing the principle of the historical idea from the ontological level into the discursive and symbolic one, exactly by emphasising this irreducible multiplicity of the Caribbean self and its histories in the analysis of modernity. Modern history, to both Glissant and Walcott, is first and foremost a concept and, due to this acknowledgment, one which necessarily invites its own reconception as it does a philosophical interrogation of the methodologies through which it has hitherto been approached. Therefore, if Walcott's amnesia refers to a conceptual and historical (B)lack that, through imagination (and sometimes even via myth), comes to favourably define a Caribbean poetics in a way that wants to move the latter toward a rehistoricisation of modernity, than it may also refer – if one is to here partake of a necessary semiotic experimentalism with the term amnesia – to a strategic forgettability. This is the fact (right even) of being forgettable – of being ungraspable and irreducible in the purely Glissantian rubric of opacity. The right, ultimately, of being oneself in one's inviolable freedom space.

Conclusion: A Note on Caribbean Poetics and the Futures of Black Diaspora

... let the deep hymn

of the Caribbean continue my epilogue;
may waves remove their shawls as my mourners
walk home
to their rusted villages, good shoes in one hand,

passing a boy who walked through the ignorant foam,
and saw a sail going out or else coming in,
and watched asterisks of rain puckering the sand.

– Walcott, *Omeros*, Chapter LXIV, I

*M*y discussion throughout this paper has been concerned with the ontological and epistemological consequences of approaching the history of modernity from the position of the slave and its descendants. In particular, I have chosen to centralise the experiences of the Black Caribbean subject in the investigation of this question, asking fundamentally: what happens to the language of modernity when conceptualised from a site of (Black) Caribbean alterity? That well-received narratives of modernity fail to recognise the contributions of the Black subject in their theoretical and practical constructions is not as harmful as the consequent denial of this subject's own poetics of history. By this I mean that, while it is true that the original crime is in the exclusion – what Orlando Patterson has usefully called the “secular excommunication” of the Black slave from modernity (Patterson 5) – the final crime is in the eventual refusal of this subject's political and poetical significance. Without really suggesting that one crime is greater than the other, I have herein been concerning myself with proving how the one corrective – to challenge and ultimately replace the Western episteme and its versions of modernity –

presupposes the latter, that of examining the taxonomies of representation available to this Black Caribbean subject and its pursuit for a counter-cultural practice. This praxis, I argue, is as important for its ability to refute these Western narratives of modernity as for its willingness to meta-critically reconsider the relationship between poetics and historiographical practice. Specifically, in showing what I call a “coextensiveness” between Caribbean poetics and the history of modernity, both Walcott and Glissant also show the slave subject as not defined merely by its capacity for a poetics of resistance (although this is very important), but also by its own concern with an internal poetics of this region and its relation to the histories of modernity.

In chapter 1, therefore, I concern myself with the debunking of the Columbian-Hegelian-Froudean schema of modernity. To achieve this, I make two related arguments in particular: (1) these narratives of modernity which exclude the Caribbean from their historiographical vocabulary cannot do so without also falsifying their claims and conclusions, and (2) that because the Caribbean has its own histories and politics, the poetics it generates not only function as counter-narrative to these former accounts of modernity, but automatically also necessitate the invention of a new language of enquiry. In particular, as I show, part of the problem rests not merely in the kinds of questions asked, but (equally, if not more) in the logical foundations of this enquiring language. In other words, I here show that if Columbus, Hegel, and Froude all fail to recognise the Black Caribbean subject in their attempts to conceptualise modernity, then the successes of C.L.R. James, John, J. James Thomas, Anthony Bogues, and Simon Gikandi all lie in each of their willingness to recognise the need for a new language with which to (newly) make sense of modernity. Their advantage, still, less that they would manage to counter these untenable narratives of modernity than the fact that, while doing so, they also realise the need to reconceptualise history on both the ethical and philosophical levels. What this means is that if the relationship the Caribbean subject (and later, the Caribbean writer) has with modern history is a corrective one – i.e., represented by a predilection toward a poetics of revision – it is also so with the very conceptualisation of history itself. In the words of Lamming’s First Boy, with “What make it [history] so big as all that?”

Similarly, if chapter 1 shows the necessity for a different hermeneutic language with which to approach modernity, chapter 2 concerns itself primarily with how this language would look as exemplified by the work of Walcott and Glissant. My arguments here are informed by the recognition that both writers concern themselves, not without reason, with an explication of

the Caribbean which acknowledges the former's contributions to modernity. Both Walcott and Glissant respond to the Naipaulian critique of the Caribbean as zone of historical "nothingness" by constructing their respective poetics around this very historical gap. Rather than seeing the Caribbean in the colonial-racist manner of Columbus, Hegel, and Froude, or in the nihilist sense of Naipaul, Walcott and Glissant – each from different positions – emphasise, as is my argument, the importance of fundamentally reinterpreting the very relation between history and poetics in the imagination of this counter-cultural practice. Their work, that is, attempts to show a critical coextensiveness between a Caribbean poetics and modern history; and in so doing, argues not only for a historical continuity between the Black Caribbean subject (her histories of slavery and colonialism) and modernity, but also for a repurposing of this Caribbean poetics as valid site of rehistoricity. To achieve this, I show, Walcott would rely on his trope of *amnesia*; constructing it, in his essay "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry," as a regenerative response to Naipaul's nihilism, which in turn usefully converts this apparent nothingness into everything. Furthermore, as I show, in theorising his idea thus – as the imaginative outcome of appreciating this nothingness – Walcott appears to be involved in an re-articulation of Antonio Gramsci's related discussion of the "incubatory" quality of revolutionary societies and their politics and poetics.

Still, how Walcott's poetics of amnesia individuates itself (from this Gramscian model, for instance) is in its readiness to centralise the property of *imagination* in the construction of a Caribbean counter-cultural practice. However, my refusal to define Walcott's idea by merely presenting as the negative alternative (extension even) to Gramsci's thinking, allows me to more positively develop it as a trope assembled according to its own rules and codes of logic. In other words, Walcott's amnesia – as I deploy it throughout this paper – is distinguished less by its negative reconstruction of Gramsci's incubatory theme, than by its own positive orientation towards a regenerative poetics of the imagination. Less a negation of a Gramscian paradigm, it is instead an affirmation of a new and independent poetics of the Caribbean; a poetics with which is also rehistoricised both the Caribbean and its contributions to the histories of modernity. Particularly, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, along with Walcott's other work – specifically his collected essays *What the Twilight Says: Essays* and his poem "The Schooner Flight" – all serve to show the centrality of the trope of amnesia (and its imaginative quality) in relation to a Caribbean poeticisation of history. Whereas *Dream* plays on the trope of the mask and masking (through the character of Makak) to emphasise the performative advantage of

mimicry to the Caribbean colonial context, the essays in *What the Twilight Says* (specifically the eponymous essay) and “The Schooner *Flight*,” similarly demonstrated the inescapable expressive ambivalence (that “schizophrenic boyhood”) accompanying this subaltern’s attempts towards an exhumation of its poetics; and, later, its reconstruction of the relation between a Caribbean poetics and modern history.

To Walcott, as I show, this Caribbean poetics – with its proclivity for mimicry and performance – is marked both by its capacity for the undoing of a Western historiography of modernity as by an aspiration toward a redefinition of the relation between poetics and history (modernity). Moreover, Walcott finally responds to the accusations of a Caribbean nothingness by first identifying its conceptual potentialities for a rehistoricity, and then by attempting to actualise it in his poetics. This is so because, to Walcott, this nothingness is nothing more than amnesia turned creativity, turned – finally, through the processes of literary and cultural imagination – everything. In other words, Walcott refuses to endorse the Naipaulean framework by precisely *re*-diagnosing this nothingness as not an end itself, but rather as a philosophical beginning for the reconceptualisation of the Caribbean as well as its poetics’ relation to modern history. In fact, as is my argument in the latter part of chapter 2, this is also how Glissant enters the conversation. While Walcott deploys the trope of amnesia to theorise the Caribbean and its histories and politics, Glissant depends on his concept of *opacity* to do the same. Here, I try to show that both ideas share a fundamental quality of both the dissolution of the Western fallacy of modernity and the exhumation of a Caribbean counter-poetics that, if it were to undo these former European taxonomies, would also do so by way of redefining the relation between poetics and history.

Opacity, in particular, denotes that capacity (of the Caribbean subject) to remain both individualised and irreducible. Furthermore, it is this capacity for individuality and irreducibility which allows the Black Caribbean subject to dodge a Western historiographical homogeneity, while also enabling her to create a critical set of her own histories, poetics, and politics with which to negotiate for her ontological and historical value. My argument here, still, is to show that Glissant’s final aim is not exclusively with the unstrategic celebration of a (cross-cultural) opacity – not, that is to say, with the mere recognition of a heterogeneous otherness that individuates the Caribbean – than it is with the pursuit, informed by a recognition of this opacity, for a historical and ontological freedom for the Black Caribbean people: “their inscrutability [i.e., opacity], which is nothing, after all, but their freedom”

(*Caribbean Discourse* 256). In other words, Glissant's understanding of opacity – as I show herein – is lodged in a materialist appreciation of the Black Caribbean subject, which identifies the realisation of freedom for this subject as only possible if this subject also retains its anonymity; or more accurately, its ungraspability. Therefore, like Walcott's trope of amnesia – which implies a forgetting – Glissant's idea, too, privileges this psychological element (a conceptual ungraspability) to protect the Caribbean subject from the violent cartography of the Western episteme. Still, since my ambition is less with a delineation of these thematic similarities, between Walcott's and Glissant's thinking, than it is with an appreciation of how their respective poetics treat the question of modernity, I am more interested in a reading of Glissant's writing which evinces this latter objective.

This is the logic which informs my reading of *Caribbean Discourses: Selected Essays, Poetics of Relation*, and *The Collected Poems of Édouard Glissant*. My purpose here is twofold: to show that, according to Glissant, a rehistoricisation of the Caribbean is marked by its capacity to recognise – by way of an exhumation of the histories of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean – their relatedness and inherent capacity for the rearticulation of modernity, and that through this Foucauldian poetics of “archaeology,” to also avoid the travesty of hierarchies and stratifications according to which is originally established a monolingual politics of the Caribbean. Glissant, in other words, evokes the trope of opacity in order to be able to disturb this oppressive monolingual politics and its capacity for the complete silencing of the Caribbean subject and her history. In order to free the Caribbean subject from a Western historiographical category, I argue with Glissant, her opacity – her “right not to be understood” (Britton 19) – would need to be both respected and centralised in the creation of her representative poetics. Indeed, this is what my reading of Glissant's poem, “The Indies,” had shown: that in order for the Caribbean subject to regain its ontological autonomy and historical import, not only would its histories of the slave trade and colonisation need to be registered faithfully in narratives of modernity, but that this would also need to be accompanied by a simultaneous recognition of its opacity. Furthermore, because this opacity – itself a result of overlapping historical and political phenomena – is best captured by the poetics of this region, this poetics itself also becomes a site of historical recording, of a rehistoricity proper. Therefore, if *Caribbean Discourses: Selected Essays* and *Poetics of Relation* are works concerned with the historical and conceptual rediscovery of a heterogeneous and transnational Caribbean counter-hermeneutics, then the poetry anthology serves as

exemplification of this new language's practicality; with its respect for the subaltern's opacity as for the historicist significance of this Caribbean subject's poetics.

Both Walcott and Glissant, finally, appeal to these tropes – of amnesia and opacity, respectively – to not only argue for the reconfiguration of modernity. Or, more accurately, of the relationship between slavery and modernity. Theirs, I show, is also with the investigation of a specifically Caribbean poetics which, if it would renounce the claims of this former Western episteme, also does so by way of inaugurating an intra-Caribbean poetics with which is both individuated the Caribbean and reimagined the relation between Black poetics and modern history. It is, in other words, not a poetics against the West as much as it is one for a Caribbean cultural and literary independence that motivates the work of these writers. And although Walcott's work may sometimes be described as merely the "recasting" of a modernist aesthetic (Pollard 2), this ultimately proves itself to be too simplistic in light of the decidedly Caribbean questions (e.g., of slavery, colonialism, and Caribbean identity) raised by both Walcott and Glissant. In fact, Walcott – like Glissant – forces his poetics to speak about the Caribbean not by simply borrowing from the modernist calculus, nor by excusing himself from its vagaries; rather, his (and Glissant's) advantage is in the preparedness to develop a Caribbean poetic autonomy which acknowledges the influence of the West without also forgetting the independence of this region and its histories. Therefore, if on one hand Walcott and Glissant move toward a celebration of a Caribbean heterogeneity, this is achieved as much through a move towards an internationalist Blackness, as it is by one within the Caribbean itself. If, in other words, this respect for a Caribbean amnesia and opacity is designed against the violence of the Western episteme, it is also meant for a uniquely Black Caribbean (and even diasporic) individuality.

In *Slavery in Africa and the Caribbean: A History of Enslavement and Identity Since the Eighteenth Century* (2012), Nadine Hunt and Olatunji Ojo usefully remind us "that Africans despite facing the limitations of freedom as a consequence of enslavement made decisions and showed that they were agents in determining their life's path" (5). Hunt's and Ojo's wisdom, I wish to show by way of conclusion, is with the accurate recognition of a productive continuity between "enslavement" and these slaves' various senses of *agency*. The point again, only more directly this time: the African slave was able, in spite of these delimiting conditions of slavery and

colonialism, to perform her identity as a legitimate free agent of the modernist project (even as this legitimacy was always denied her). This however, as I further insist here, is not to suggest that this “enslavement” is a necessary (or sufficient) condition for the formation of this African subject’s identity or for the expression of its agency – no! Rather, as Hunt and Ojo correctly intimate, and as has been my main thesis throughout this entire paper, this to say that this African slave subject comes to the Caribbean not as an incomplete subject (waiting only to be completed by a violent Western taxonomy of humanity), but as one always involved in a politics of becoming Black. A politics, moreover, which begins even before the slave trade and, more crucially, ultimately comes to favourably redefine the African Black subject and her experiences in both transnational and transhistorical language. Indeed, Walcott appears to be aware of this diasporic quality of Blackness when, in the epigraph included above, he entreats us to “... let the deep hymn/of the Caribbean continue [his and our] epilogue” (*Omeros* 325).

What is expressed in Walcott’s words, yet, not only that the African slave subject’s identity would subsist (“continue”) through this historical disenfranchisement, as that – because of this fact – the Caribbean space marks less a fracture of this subject’s consciousness as its ontological and historical continuation. An African “pastness” is here paired with a Caribbean contemporaneity to not only challenge a fallacious account of modernity (and its civilising rhetoric), but also to clearly isolate the connections between Africa and the Caribbean that are as unavoidable as they are crucial to any faithful appreciation of this Black subject’s ontological quotient. This quotient, furthermore, if it is defined by its particular ability to expose the impiety of the Western episteme, is it also useful for its capacity to locate the Caribbean within a lexicon of transnationality and diasporic movement: the “going out or else coming in.” In fact, it is this phenomenon – this fluvial element of the Caribbean – that allows it to traverse both the histories of slavery and those of civilisation without also succumbing to a theoretical contradictoriness. In fact, Brent Hayes Edwards offers a similar definition of “transnational” and “diaspora” in *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003). To Edwards, diaspora is less a term used to designate specific historical facts about Black people than “a set of practices” that allows both for the articulation and inarticulation of Black cultural and linguistic differences through circuits of aesthetic practice and intellectual scholarship.⁴² If we were to accept this definition of diaspora, as I would

⁴² Perhaps Edwards’ best attempt at a careful definition of diaspora, outside of his study *The Practice of Diaspora*, comes from his article “The Uses of Diaspora” (2001). As I am less interested in the exact contents of

suggest be the case here, then it becomes very easy to appreciate both Walcott's and Glissant's work as involved in not only a critiquing of Western narratives of modernity, but also – and perhaps more importantly – as concerned in the explication of a Black diasporic literary and cultural praxis. This praxis, however, as Walcott and Glissant help prove (and as I too hold), is defined by its movement toward an internationalisation as by a commitment to a regional aesthetics – or more accurately, a creation of a regional Caribbean poetics.

In other words, if diaspora – according to Edwards' definition of it – refers to those internationalist connexions between Black people and their literary and cultural productions, then in the Caribbean context it also denotes those practices and phenomenologies of Blackness within the region itself. Therefore, what Walcott and Glissant assist in revealing to the Caribbean scholar, is that the Caribbean itself becomes a valid site of diasporic activity the moment its histories of slavery and colonialism are centralised in its poetics and politics. While the Caribbean rightly partakes of an internationalist diaspora, it also simultaneously delineates what may be called a specifically intra-Caribbean diasporic practice. The result, additionally, is the realisation of a specifically Caribbean aesthetic and cultural practice. This, I wish now to add, is the specialness of both Walcott's and Glissant's work: that if they each manage to challenge the Western epistemic lens and its wayward accounts of the history of modernity, they also – exactly in so doing – open up the possibilities of an intra-Caribbean cultural sensibility. It is this sensibility, likewise, which supplants the false “universalism” promoted by this Western catalogue of both modernist history and literary practice. In showing that the history of modernity is a product of both Western and Caribbean endeavour, what is also highlighted is the cultural independence of the Caribbean and its own poetics. If, as Catherine Hall has argued, “[the West] and West Indianness have always existed in relation to each other: they have been mutually constitutive over a long connected history” (Hall 35), then it is also true that – to borrow the succinct phrasing of Silvio Torres-Saillant,

...[t]o recognize this interconnectedness between the two worlds is not equivalent to saying that they are nor can be one and the same. Indeed, they are worlds apart. Both regions, for instance, dealt with slavery and sugar plantations, but certainly not in the same way. People in the hegemonic nations of the West knew about those institutions only through the benefits their

Edwards' paper, I mention it here solely in order to give direction as to what thinking of diaspora informs my own work.

countries reaped from them. In the Caribbean those institutions had a direct impact on the daily lives of all inhabitants; black, aborigines, and whites (Torres-Saillant 5)

Put differently, it is not enough to merely critique the West and its accounts of modernity by emphasising the continuities between the West and the “non-West”, what should also accompany these efforts is the need to recognise the literary and cultural individuality of the Caribbean as expression both of ontological legitimacy and historical activity. Any other way, we risk perpetuating what Timothy Mitchell has called a “European-centered dualism”: “To see modernity as a product not of the West but of its interaction with the non-West still leaves a problem. It assumes the existence of the West and its exterior, long before the world’s identities had been divided into this neat, European-centered dualism” (Mitchell 3). What is registered by Torres-Saillant and Mitchell is the importance of appreciating that while it may be true that the West and the Caribbean were always involved in a co-mutual constitution of each other; equally true is that the Caribbean manages, in spite of this co-mutuality, to construct itself as an autonomous space of historical and literary practice. The Black Caribbean subject does not come to be because of her encounter with the West, but – having always been – she merely continues to negotiate for her ontological autonomy and historical relevance in the Caribbean, and, by extension, in the oceanic Black diaspora.

I have chosen to conclude my discussion in this fashion – that is, with a brief note (epilogue even) on the futures of Black diaspora – for at least two reasons. On the one hand, and as has been the point of my two chapters, seeing the Caribbean as site of a counter-hermeneutics against Western narratives of modernity – what I have chosen in the first chapter to call “the Columbian-Hegelian-Froudean schema of modernity” – enables us to appreciate the crucially central role played by Black bodies in the formation of modernity and what Gikandi would call “the culture of taste.” Specifically, this construction of the Caribbean as counter-hermeneutics, further allows us to reject that limited lexicon which opts to simply see this region as an expression of (a historical and ontological) nothingness. On the other hand (and since it is seriously insufficient to merely identify these counter-cultural practices and poetics), with this discovery – of the historical continuities between slavery and modernity – we are also then able to adequately theorise the Caribbean as a space with its own histories as one with its particular ways of archiving these histories. The recognition of this cultural specificity, in addition, forces us to appreciate that, while indebted to an undeniable historical continuity between the West

and itself, the Caribbean nevertheless retains its own cultural individuality with which it also negotiates its historical and socio-economic materialities. Therefore, while it is definitely valuable to locate the Caribbean – as does Edwards and Gilroy, for instance – within an internationalist register of diasporic criticism, perhaps more useful is the attendant need to advocate for an intra-Caribbean diaspora.⁴³ The goal, however, should never be to privilege one of these understandings of diaspora over the other; but rather to show that the internationalist does not necessarily exclude the possibilities of the intra-regionalist.

Indeed, looking at the history of modernity thus – as the result of an “undeniable casual relation” between the Caribbean (its histories of slavery and colonialism) and the West – enables us to begin to ask a more nuanced question: namely, in which language does this slave subject now speak? What, asked differently, is the language available for the communication of this subject in its contemporary experiences with the continued violence of a Western cartography of humanity? In other words, in moving towards an appreciation of an independent Caribbean poetics, we also not only recognise the inescapably diasporic nature of this region and its cultural activity – but also begin to realise that this poetics, because it is also diasporic and heterogeneous, necessarily locates itself within the ongoing investigation into a Black literary and cultural tradition(s). This is how Gikandi poses the same rhetorical question:

Was it possible that slavery, which had functioned as the threshold of modernity, would no longer haunt the present? Only time would tell. What seemed obvious was that the ghosts in the archives and tombs of the modern world would perhaps need a new language to account for [their futures]” (Gikandi 285).

Throughout, my response to this question has been that if the Black Caribbean subject – that “ghost in the archive” – were to speak, not only would this language need to be “new”, but that it would also need to be self-sufficiently strategic and, logically, internally defined. It is this, the “strategies of language and resistance,” that Walcott and Glissant offer us. Their strategies yet, not only a reaction to the West and its codes of modernity, but – perhaps even more instrumentally – a reinvention both of the historiographical taxonomy of modernity as of that

⁴³ I have in mind, in particular, Edwards’ *The Practice of Diaspora* (2009) and Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993). These are the text which, even if as they have led the theorisation of diaspora, have mainly done so by way of centralising the European and American contexts in their discussions. I wish to avoid this and, rather, consider the meaning of diaspora when viewed from the position of the Caribbean and Africa. This, I have argued, is what the futures of Black diaspora entail.

Conclusion: A Note on Caribbean Poetics and the Futures of Black Diaspora

of the Caribbean as legitimate site of historical activity and ontological debate. Moreover, it is not that nothing ever happens in the Caribbean, as that what happened (and continues to happen) can only accrue meaning if and only if a new hermeneutic language is invented *by and for* the Black Caribbean subject. This language, ultimately, must be marked by its particular unwillingness to forego the histories of slavery and colonialism in the conception of its methods, as by its recognition of the continuities of these histories with the poetics of this region; and, by extension, with the poetics of the greater Black diaspora – and their manifold implications on the futures of Black thought.

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